Chapter IV

The Interregnum Odysseys

*Time is change: we measure its passing by how much things alter.*

*(The Late Bourgeois World 9-10)*

Derek Walcott in his poem ‘A Far Cry from Africa’ describes with haunting internal pain, the quelling of the Mau Mau uprising, by the British colonials. Witnessing the mass slaughter of people, he realizes he is between two cultures unable to escape the paralysis of helplessness arising from the inability to take sides:

I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live?

Walcott: *Collected Poems* 1948-1984

In the changing clime of South Africa in the turbulent eighties, in the post Soweto period, a similar dilemma, as has been voiced by Walcott, emerges in the minds of the people. The literary landscape of South Africa which had been fragmented by cultural and linguistic diversity becomes more deeply divided by the abyss that separates the black and white experience under apartheid.
Steve Biko, the spokesperson for the Black Consciousness which was material in exploring and developing Africanism as a locus of philosophical, social and artistic value, states in his speech, ‘Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity’ –

The thesis is in fact a strong white racism and, therefore, the antithesis to this must, *ipso facto*, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance – a true humanity where power politics will have no place.

*(Southern African Literatures 338)*

Gordimer, being a white writer forced to live in interface with the black oppressed majority in the South African apartheid state, is forced to acknowledge her marginalised position and yet recognize the necessity of redefining oneself within the new collective life within new structures. On 14 October 1982 Gordimer delivered the lecture titled ‘Living in the Interregnum’ in New York by referring to a ‘heady’ vision of her country “swaying with the force of revolutionary change” at “the end of the colonial era in Africa”. The title was an echo of Gramsci’s well known remark: “The old is dying, and the new cannot be born, in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms” (263). Literature under these circumstances seems symptomatic of the end of colonialism, and the beginning of a new era; which is what gives such literature its interest, and power.
Gordimer observes in this lecture, “Black writers today often feel compelled to write polemics while white writers are exposed to the equally corrosive temptation to write self consciously courageously and therefore sentimental fiction” (The Essential Gesture 265). She testifies to the way politics transforms the meaning of literary perspectives when she quotes and endorses, in ‘English-Language Literature and Politics in South Africa’ and elsewhere, the poet Mongane Wally Serote’s “claim to the right to dictate terms”:

White people are white people  
They must learn to listen  
Black People are black people  
They must learn to talk

(Qtd in The Essential Gesture 267)

Hence Gordimer’s fiction characteristically seeks out mutually revealing encounters between black and white in the small and often bitter epiphanies of ordinary life, providing an arena for the blacks to speak and the whites to listen. Martin Trump offers the following explanation to describe the dilemma faced by Gordimer in transcending her own perspective in writing about other races in South Africa, whose goals and aspirations she supports:

Gordimer is literally caught in a ‘split historical position’ – she has come to identify herself with the causes of her black countrymen and yet is legally and socially cut off from any form of expression of this commitment other than through her writing. As a result of the social
division, her writing has to bear the burden of her dislocated contact with the majority of her compatriots.

(Qtd in Journal of Commonwealth Literature 67)

Gordimer’s fiction inhabits a very different Africa – the barren world of white colonialism and the even bleaker terrain of the modern apartheid state that superseded it. It is not the Africa of tangled jungles and savage tribes. But the old patterns retain their power to influence. The tension between organizing myths for Africa which have historically served the imaginations of outsiders, mostly men, and Gordimer’s continuing search for her own African perspective in a country with deepening divisions between blacks and whites generates the subtexts of her two novels *Burger’s Daughter* and *July’s People*. Both novels pose in acute form the question of whose story will get told and who will tell it. These novels are informed by a major shift in Gordimer’s view of her situation as a South African and writer committed to her craft. Her work gets characterized by increasing literariness and stress on textuality. Gordimer’s preoccupation with distinctly postmodernist issues may represent a re-centering of political engagement in an era of atomization and uncertainty.

**Burger’s Daughter**

*Burger’s Daughter* is a more overtly political novel than its predecessor *The Conservationist* which was mainly a symbolic and subjective treatment of individual consciousness. The novel is set against the backdrop of the terrible children’s crusade of 1976, the
Soweto uprising led by school-aged protestors seeking to purify the consciousness of their elders against the introduction of Afrikaans—the native language of the apartheid into the school curriculum. The novel is concerned about the construction of individual identities. As Clingman says, Gordimer attempts to assess whether there can be a role for the whites in the context of Soweto and after and what the practical implications of such a role might be.

*Burger’s Daughter* concerns itself with the depiction of an obviously recognizable public figure. It investigates the story of Rosa Burger, daughter of the legendary radicals Lionel and Cathy Burger. It probes the ethical dilemmas and choices of someone effectively born into a tradition of white political resistance, or more precisely, of someone whose commitment is determined by a particular ideology. The question of alignment turns out ultimately not to be a matter of choice: there is no escaping her inheritance, though there is a need for her to refine and define what it means to her personally.

Lionel and Cathy Burger are representative of a generation of white activists who came into prominence in the 1950s. Lionel Burger is modelled on Abram (Bram) Fischer, a lawyer and a prominent member of South African Communist Party, who acted as a counsel for the defense in the ‘Rivonia Trial’ of the seventeen Umkhonto leaders who were arrested in July 1963 and on whom Gordimer had written an essay “Why did Bram Fischer Choose Jail?”. Lionel Burger’s career encapsulates the oppositional mood of his generation. He is a long term communist, and had been one of the accused in the
Treason Trials of 1957. His activities are brought to an end by his arrest and imprisonment for life and he dies in prison. The legacy for Rosa however comes from both her parents, who had been responsible South African citizens (‘burghers’). Rosa’s quest is to define her own sense of responsible citizenship in becoming the true daughter of those ‘burghers’.

Rosa’s life is presented in a symbolic parallel with the apartheid era. Her birth in May 1948 coincides with the coming to power of the first Nationalistic Government. The childhood and adolescence parallel the Treason Trials and the Sharpeville Massacre. Her acceptance of her mission as the Burger’s Daughter comes in the wake of Soweto uprising, and Rosa is among those people detained, arrested or banned in 1977. These parallels give the novel an almost allegorical structure. The epigraph to the novel is a quotation from Claude Levi-Strauss and emphasizes Gordimer’s preoccupation with public-private line: “I am the place in which something has occurred” (*Burger’s Daughter* n.pag.) It articulates a conception of personal politics in which the individual is the site of historical and political discourse, and the consciousness, its receptor and creator.

Gordimer uses a dialectic structure to trace the developing consciousness of Rosa Burger through different experiences that chart disillusionment with, withdrawal from and finally a recommitment to radical political activity. This progression is related to Rosa’s personal relationships: in part one of the novel she is affected by her lover Conrad and his egocentric world-view which stands in contrast to the
sterile commitment of the Burger family. In part two Rosa pursues her attraction to cultivate her personal, sensual side. In the final section, the terms of Rosa’s return and recommitment are given. The novel includes in each section third-person narratives juxtaposed with Rosa’s first-person narration, which is presented for different addressees: for Conrad in part one, for Katya in part two and for Lionel in the third part. This sequence of addressees facilitates Rosa’s developing reflections on her situation. In his perceptive review of the novel *Burger’s Daughter*, Stephen Gray remarks:

> Its circuitry is incredibly complex: one has not only to read, but plough a way through it. The dense, knotted, tangled style compels total involvement, total concentration on the reader’s part, as Gordimer lines up areas of experience which possibly, the reader does not know, cannot have known. Thus, to know *Burger’s Daughter* is to have one’s experience of one’s own land extended . . . [it] means to us, the challenge of having to reshape and reform our own habits and expectations as readers.

The novel challenges and even affronts the reader’s sensibility, for the text constantly asserts its own inner divisions and dislocations, its frequent changes in voice and tone. “The early fiction, down to *A Guest of Honour* had remained silent about the processes of its composition: *Burger’s Daughter* flaunts its own style as artifact” (Green 557). In *A Guest of Honour* the career of Bray is related by one
single narrator, and it is possible to discern the attitude of this single narrator, and by implication, also of the novelist towards Bray. *Burger’s Daughter* is narratively more complex in that several different narrators are created, including Rosa herself, and they address themselves to various matching listeners. “I am the place in which something has occurred”: the Levi Straus quotation indicates clearly enough that Rosa is the center of the action, yet much of the action is composed not of external political events, but rather of meditations on those same events by Rosa herself and by several other characters. Rosa, then, is seen from so many angles – some sympathetic, others neutral, one actively hostile – that is very difficult to choose one of these perspectives and associate it with the novelist’s own private judgement. Such is the variety of the novel’s perspectives that Rosa Burger emerges as a complex character and her situation too as fluid and full of contradictions.

The narrative is fully dialogized wherein different voices and perspectives are in conflict. In each section Rosa’s different addressees also affect style of the third-person narrative or even take it up themselves. By problematizing the narrative perspective Gordimer fashions a novelistic form which reinforces her investigation of ideology and discourse. The mutability of Rosa’s identity – constructed by her parents, the security forces, by Zwelinzima and by herself – is demonstrated by the problematic narrative perspective.

Rosa the heroine stands at the epicenter where several conflicting forces converge: the Communist dissent of her father, an
Afrikaner doctor, meets there with the desire of the verligte ('enlightened' in Afrikaans) Nationalist Vermeulen, to reclaim Burger as a tribal hero who had merely been deflected by his leftist beliefs; white involvement in the struggle for political justice, exemplified by her father and his colleagues, clashes at one point in Rosa’s life with the desire of the Black Consciousness movement to exclude all whites from the struggle. In some ways Rosa is presented as a passive character, the locus of warring forces more than the initiator of action. She is a contradictory character, both repelled and fascinated by her father’s single-mindedness. The function of the ‘complex circuitry’ the various narratives employed in Burger’s Daughter is to prevent the reader from ‘simplifying Rosa ensuring instead that she is seen as a figure in a landscape. In form Burger’s Daughter is not seamless univocal narrative; instead it jerks, abruptly changes tone and direction and is full of what Gérard Genette calls ‘metalepses’, sudden narrative transitions which express the variety of aspects in which Rosa is being shown. Burger’s Daughter the novel for which Nadine Gordimer herself has the highest regard, is the most complex rendering of the theme that has preoccupied her from the beginning, the “human conflict”, in her own words, “between the desire to live a personal, private life and the rival claim of special responsibility to one’s fellow men” (The Essential Gesture 253). As well as being “Burger’s Daughter”, Rosa is related to Gordimer’s earlier heroes: Helen Shaw, Toby Hood, Elizabeth Van Den Sandt, and James Bray. Rejecting her father’s doctrine out of the need to lead her own life and
then being herself rejected and vilified by the young black whom her father has ‘adopted’, Rosa nevertheless returns to post-Soweto Johannesburg, there to be detained without the glory that had been attached to her father’s confinement. The new phase for Rosa is also a new phase for South African history. Black consciousness advocating the need for blacks to take responsibility for their own political advancement, is tacitly approved in her decision to take a subservient role in her political recommitment. “Her virtual anonymity at the end is telling: she is marginalized by the narrative’s verbatim transcription of the S.S.R.C. (Soweto Students’ Representative Council, a ‘black consciousness’ organization) manifesto, the very reverse of the process by which the narrative of *The Lying Days* had foregrounded Helen’s developing consciousness at the expense of the strike and deaths in the townships.

Critics have identified the classic narrative mode of a colonial adventure tale embedded in most of Gordimer’s novels, especially the *Burger’s Daughter*.

[A] . . . characteristic of adventure tales set in Africa is the marginality of white women, who serve, like the Victorian angel in the house, as tokens of patriarchal power and emblems of virtue in an evil world. This is particularly true of adventure stories with an African setting, where the dominance of white over black is at issue. In a colonial situation such as the South African one, the role of white women is often symbolically
rendered through a miscegenation myth which sees them as Miranda, the prize sought by the Calibans of this earth. One consequence of being thus idealized is that women are categorically denied a piece of action, which is reserved for a male protagonist. As a result whenever the daughter of empire has metamorphosed into the female adventurer, in fact as well as fiction, she has been regarded as an anomaly, an “honorary male.” She is relabelled to minimize the challenge to the prevailing pattern in which an invitingly supine continent is penetrated by aggressive explorers and fortune hunters. (‘Miranda’s Story: Nadine Gordimer and the Literature of Empire’, *Novel* 227-8)

Gordimer’s continuing drive to demythologize the landscape to cleanse it of the accretions of centuries of outsider’s reports and insider’s mystifications should have succeeded. But traces of the racist and patriarchal formulations about human experience in the quest plot of imperialistic fiction persistently surface. It is through the stories of two very different white women trying to come to terms with the roles defined for them in South Africa that Gordimer most rigorously confronts the contradictions that her main avenue to speech is through tarnished metaphors about black and white. In *Burger’s Daughter* and *July’s People* the white woman’s adventure in Africa which breaks the mould of the class adventure tale frees
Gordimer to purge her fiction of the remnants of the age of imperialism.

In the transplanted European civilization of the colonial world the symbolic value of the white woman as a repository for cultural illusions increases. Sexual mythologies are linked to those of racial oppression. White women are seen as too fragile to bear certain truths. They must be protected. The structure of racial domination exaggerates the gender asymmetry of traditional western society. It also propagates a dual hierarchy of power. The white woman in Africa may well find herself in a society that puts a premium on conventional male activities and attributes and relegates her to a subordinate position. But in certain circumstances she has the option to be much more powerful that she would be at ‘home’.

The fierce repression of modern day South Africa imprisons the outsider more firmly within that role without erasing the difference between the experience of men and women. She may be unwittingly complicitous like the well-intentioned liberal Maureen Smales in *July’s People* or a determined opponent of the system of exploitation like Rosa Burger. In either case the contemporary white woman’s adventure in Africa is distinct from that of her male counterpart. She is possessed of a symbolic significance she cannot cast off. It allows her power at a particular price. The sexual mythologies intended to constrain black men limit her as well defining her as property and condemning her to be both oppressor and ancillary victim. Since
Gordimer considers the writer’s subject to be the “consciousness of his own era” this inevitably becomes part of her work.

In *Burger’s Daughter* Gordimer rewrites *The Lying Days* in a new key. Rosa Burger’s parents were communists committed to active opposition to apartheid. It is therefore a revolutionary heritage that burdens Rosa so that her refusal to be Burger’s daughter in the period following her father’s death in jail reverses the conventional *bildungsroman* pattern of flight from, and eventual return to the bourgeoisie. The novel also invokes the ceremonies of innocence to displace the miscegenation theme, for Rosa spends part of her childhood with a black brother temporarily absorbed in her family. By the same token, having been in and out of the black townships on countless occasions with her parents she has no need to travel to Soweto for the adventure of forbidden friendships and she sees through the false consciousness of those who do.

Although Rosa does not choose to regard her life as exotic it has been one of continuing adventure into Black Africa through her parents’ efforts to forge common cause with revolutionaries across the colour line by means of a shared ideology and practice. Rosa is an ‘old hand’ who has always lived with secrecy and who learned at an early age to regard constant surveillance as ordinary. When she contemplates the gallery of sensation seekers who surround her romantic fellow travelers who find their Africa in association with people like her parents or more daringly in seeking to extract from
blacks some recognition of their post liberal *bona fides*, it is with amused, only slightly contemptuous detachment.

She saves her real anger for her beloved father. Not simply a new breed of adventurer penetrating the world of blacks in search of the intangible treasure genuine alliance might bring, Rosa is her father’s daughter. This complicates matters, especially because she is deeply disaffected in the period following his death. The men who are drawn to her by the glamour of the family business are reminders of her peculiar position. She remarks of one that “. . . being the lover of Lionel Burger’s daughter for a month or two was the nearest he would ever get to the barricades” (64-65). Her parents and their circle have led lives of genuine risk and idealism, without the taint of ego that can vitiate even radical politics in South Africa, but Rosa sees the risk as foolish and the idealism as futile in a world that won’t conform to theory

Still the kits with invisible ink, forged passports, the secret plans kept like dry cleaners’ slips, the mailing lists the same old story of people who are “approached” and turned state witness after having licked some envelopes . . . (124)

Her father’s comrades wait patiently for Rosa to finish to mourning and become active in their work again unaware that she no longer shares the belief that sustains them, an apocalyptic vision of the end that will give meaning to all the preceding days. At the same time the new black leadership rejects and presents by participation its
struggle: “In jail! . . . He goes for his ideas about me, I go for my ideas about myself” (159). Unable to carry on as Burger's daughter Rosa no longer understands her role in her country which martyred him.

Rosa's family quarrel is with her father, even though her mother who died first shared Lionel's work and also endured prison sentences for her political activities. Rosa accuses both parents in memory of having used her for the cause for it is only Lionel about whom she confesses the “childish secret” that “I knew I must have wished him to die” (63). She singles him out for passionate apostrophe and he is a constant point of reference as she tries to review her past and reconstruct her life. Lionel is the more compelling of her parents, the focus of the band of the faithful. As one of the rare few able to reconcile Communist ideology with the objectives of a national liberation struggle he is source of a quiet authoritative leadership. Most importantly having rejected the colonial father's proprietary interest in his daughter as a hostage to the future of white supremacy, he has deliberately and lovingly prepared her to work as he did for a different kind of author. She is, ironically, ‘Burger's daughter’ with all that implies in the police state because he has never questioned that she would carry on his work. As Rosa comes to terms with a form of freedom that feels like nothing so much as compulsion trying to act on her own desire to emulate her father at a point in history already very different from his moment, the novel revises several of the central plots of the literature of empire.
Rosa must come to terms with her patrimony as Burger’s daughter. This aspect of her dilemma evokes an older imperial paradigm, Shakespeare’s metaphor for the displacement of desire for the exotic and forbidden by a rationale for domination. Allusions to *The Tempest* are not deliberately inscribed in Gordimer’s text like those to the Conradian quest. Alive in the structures through which varied they manifest themselves unbidden in complex relation to the overt political intentions of the novel. The house of this benevolent Prospero, famous for its hospitality was an enchanted island within the police state a place where blacks, whites and the undercover police all gathered to swim in Lionel Burger’s pool and eat his *boerwors* – defiance of the state played out in a quiet suburban neighbourhood. What Rosa calls Lionel’s “sweet lucidity” (349) contained all these contradictions, including welcoming “Caliban” as a son who in the freemasonry of childhood, shared his daughter’s bed. The two would huddle at night to diminish the terrors of bad dreams and one of Rosa’s earliest memories is waking to the warmth of bedclothes soaked in the other child’s urine. But the boy Baasie who as a man bitterly resents his nickname in the Burger household (it means ‘little master’), was actually the son of Isaac Vulindlela, a fellow revolutionary whose clandestine work prevented his making a home for himself. In their different ways both Rosa and Baasie experience Lionel’s love as a coercion.

Rosa feels the touch of the magician’s hand in the future she is expected to embrace, wed to a revolutionary ideal by her father’s will.
Having been raised with Baasie in a house where the “white way of using blackness as a way of perceiving a sensual redemption as romantics do or of perceiving fears as racialists do” were equally exposed as the “two sides of false consciousness” (135), Rosa’s inheritance should include the right to live in the South Africa which had claimed her father’s life. Lionel pursued his course with ‘elation’ even though he was ultimately impotent against the government. But Rosa’s reading of their place in history propels her out of her father’s framework. Suffering from anhedonia, she is unable to make attachments to people or the cause. Her grief for her father is swamped by her grief for her inability to feel an emotion uncomplicated by the politics of race or to reach a conviction untainted by the suspicion of futility.

She feels simultaneously abandoned by her father and overwhelmed by his claim on her, a claim on her presumptive willingness to struggle in the cause. Rosa is finally convinced that she doesn’t know how to live in ‘Lionel’s world’ by an encounter by an old black man who is cruelly beating his donkey. Vanity keeps her from using her ‘unanswerable’ white authority to stop him, and shame and anger overcome her at this complicity in evil. In order to escape the tormenting adventure of her Africa she compromises her principles to secure a passport and seeks refuge in Europe with Lionel’s first wife, an apolitical woman who knew “how to defect from him” (264). The break with her father is underlined by her use of the indulgence of well-connected Afrikaner politician to get the passport.
Before she leaves Rosa canvasses the possibilities of sisterhood as an alternative to being her father’s daughter. Despite her vigilance to avoid romanticizing blacks and her own relations with them, Rosa succumbs for a while to the magnetism of Marisa Kgosane, the wife of a political prisoner who like Nelson Mandela has been held for years on the infamous Robben Island. She soon recollects herself after attending a women’s political gathering where she is dismayed by the foolish rhetoric and the complete failure of understanding between the elderly black church ladies and the white liberal socialites who seek a mutual alliance. The event confirms her belief that “the common possessions of ‘vaginas, wombs, and breasts’ the bearing of children and awful compulsive love of them” (204) does very little to bridge the distance between the lives of black and white women.

In France, she contemplates permanent exile. A chance meeting with Baasie her long lost brother precipitates her return to South Africa. The only legacy of their childhood in Lionel’s house Baasie is willing to acknowledge is the bond of hatred. He pours Caliban’s curse over Rosa in a drunken, middle-of-the-night phone call after they have recognized one another at a political party in London. He accuses her father of having denied him his history and Rosa of not even knowing his name or what it means: “Zwel-in-zima. That’s my name. Suffering land. The name my father gave me” (380). Rosa listens in horror to the fury of her one time black brother, but it is the venom of her response that sends her back to her native land.
That, and her realization that there is no defecting from life: “My sense of sorority was clear” (332). Rosa now sees sorority as an obligation, and not a privilege or passport to the real Africa. Although she is jailed soon after her return, where she quickly makes contact with Marisa Kgosane and other women in the movement who are behind bars again, Rosa is beyond indulging in a symbolic sisterhood as a replacement for political action. Instead she participates in the camaraderie of genuine sorority created to subvert the state imposed female society in which these political prisoners must live.

She is free in other ways as well. In her dim self she sees the same patch of reflected life that had heartened Lionel and she can now confess that there was ‘something sublime’ in him (349) while still undertaking to find her own way to live in South Africa to find her own route to the future and the “counter-system of communications that doesn’t appear on the road maps” (207). Rosa accepts her imprisonment without the comforting illusion that it welcomed by the new revolutionaries among the Africans. She has left friends and a man she loves behind in France along with the opportunity to escape being Lionel Burger’s daughter and being “accountable to the Future” (304). In returning to South Africa she has chosen the somber adventure of political engagement while throwing off the false consciousness of the “new” Miranda, Prospero’s well meant paternal offering to a nation of Calibans. Yet she is vulnerable to Baasie’s charge of bad faith because the symbolism of the closing scene which suggests reconciliation with the father speaks only of Rosa’s
liberation. *Burger’s Daughter* remains her story, not Baasie’s. Caliban’s voice is still heard only in his oppressor’s language.

*July’s People*

In a review of *July’s People* Lewis Nkosi wrote, “In South Africa everyone dreams about revolution – about the nature of its coming, about the extent and limit of the eventual horror . . . Revolution is our special nightmare” (Qtd. in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 1990 71). As the South African crisis deepened and the State of emergency proclaimed on July 20, 1985 it inaugurated furthered spirals of violence and repression, bringing the country closer to the revolution foreshadowed in *The Conservationist* and the *July’s People*. The imminent revolution hurtling towards an apocalypse brought in its wake myriads of problems, while moral ambiguities deepened. Gordimer speaks about this condition in one of her interviews:

In a society like that of South Africa there are so many people and so many sides. There are people whom one trusts absolutely who turn out to be police agents . . . It’s a very extraordinary thing to take someone into your confidence only to discover that all along he’s an agent who has been paid to spy on you. (*Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* 187)

The novel is a fictional representation of the Gramscian statement quoted earlier and which forms the epigraph of the novel. *July’s People* presents the diversity of morbid symptoms foreseen by him
during the interregnum days when the old is dead and the new is struggling to be born. Gordimer describes the state of interregnum as “a state of Hegel’s disintegrated consciousness, of contradictions” (The Essential Gesture 269). She explains,

It is from its internal friction that energy somehow must be struck, for us whites; energy to break the vacuum of which we are subconsciously aware, for however hated and shameful the collective life of apartheid and its structures has been to us, there is, now, the unadmitted fear of being without structures. The interregnum is not only between two social orders but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined. (269-70)

*July’s People* depicts this friction between two structures: white and black, as well as two identities: mistress and servant. Like *Burger’s Daughter*, *July’s People* also is an examination of the construction of identities, but the dynamics of the two novels differ. *July’s People* is a brief and powerful condemnation of consumer capitalism and the identities it creates and sustains.

*July’s People* is set against the background of full-scale revolution, engulfing the whole country. South Africa’s blacks, aided by their neighbours begin to overthrow their white government, downing jumbo jets with ground-to-air missiles and razing commercial centres and white suburbs. The Smales family, Maureen, Bamford and their three young children, flee from their Johannesburg home to
the village of their servant July, six hundred kilometers to the east, and for the four weeks spanned by the novel they live in his mother's hut, anxiously tuning their transistor radio for news of the revolution's outcome. Even at July's the result is uncertain although whatever has happened the Smaleses' world is now irreparably destroyed. 'Back there' the phrase they use to refer to their lives of middle-class comfort, now no longer exists and can never be recreated.

The transition between the two world of urban white affluence and rural black deprivation, which their servant had managed to span for the previous fifteen years, is too violent for Maureen and Bamford, although their children quickly acclimatize themselves, learning the vernacular and playing happily with July's children. However for Maureen the decent, concerned woman on whom the novel is largely focused, the change is cataclysmic, jumbling the sequence of her past lives, transporting her to “another time, place and consciousness” (29), an echo of Austen's “another country”. She feels very soon after their arrival in the village that she has been transformed utterly: “She was already not what she was. No fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know, could not have imagined or discovered through imagination” (29). July’s People is itself a fiction that tries to compete with the blanks of what is unknown and unimaginable at the edge of the white novelist’s comprehension. Akin to Maureen's architect husband, this is a novel that “struggled hopelessly words that were not phrases from back there, words that
would make the truth that must be forming here, out of the black, out of themselves” (127). Constantly reaching out in to the silence of the imminent upheaval, *July’s People* tries to articulate what it will be like for a decent white couple to experience the transformation into ‘blacks’, harried from their home and bereft of accustomed physical and psychological supports.

Their lack of material possessions is what first impresses Maureen, the daughter of a white miner and wife of a rich architect:

They had nothing.

In their houses, there was nothing. At first. You had to stay in the dark of the hut a long while to make out what was on the walls. In the wife’s but a wavy pattern of broad white and ochre bands. In others . . . she caught a glimpse of a single painted circle, an eye or target, as she saw it. In one dwelling where she was invited to enter there was the tail of an animal and a rodent skull, dried gut, dangling from the thatch. Commonly there were very small mirrors snapping at the stray beams of light like hungry fish rising. They reflected nothing. An impression – sensation – of seeing something intricately banal, manufactured, replicated, made her turn as if someone had spoken to her from back there. It was in the hut where the yokes and traces for the plough-oxen were. She went inside again and discovered insignia, like war medals, nailed just to the left of the dark doorway. The
enamel emblem’s red cross was foxed and pitted with damp, bonded with dirt to the mud and dung plaster that was slowly incorporating it. (29)

The dessicated tail of an animal and fleshless skull of the rat, dimly perceived through the gloom and dirt, hark back to the opening chapter of Gordimer’s first novel, when Helen peers through the window of the location store at the ‘dusty lion’s tails’. The properties in the two scenes may be similar, but a crucial change has occurred in the relationship between the white perceiver and the dusty charms: in 1953, Helen Shaw can afford the luxury of the curious spectator who can walk away from the store; in 1981 Maureen Smales gas to live in this environment, for she has nowhere to go.

Indeed the Smales are now July’s dependents, relying on him for supplies of sugar and condensed milk and for his friendly intervention with the neighbouring Chief. The grammatical ambiguity at the heart of the novel’s title gracefully embodies their altered relationship as the revolution transforms July’s owners into his impotent guests and the villagers’ “creatures, like their cattle and pigs” (96). In the four weeks of their residence in the village the Smales are stripped of their material possessions, their bakkie neatly appropriated by July as the only means of securing their groceries from the distant Indian store and Bam’s shotgun stolen by a villager who leaves to join the freedom fighters. Finally, in the novel’s penultimate chapter, the linguistic and social conventions that have hidden that have hidden Maureen and July from seeing each other
clearly for the past fifteen years fall away, and for the first time they talk to each other without pretense and disguise, he in the vernacular, she in an English now unmodified by the need to simplify and patronize. This scene near the parked bakkie is both a murderous duel and a lovers’ tryst, leaving Maureen naked. Next day, with an animal’s desperation to survive, she runs toward the helicopter that had landed near the village, heedless of whether she will find it piloted by Government troops or by black immigrants:

She runs: trusting herself with all the suppressed trust of a lifetime, alert, like a solitary animal at the season when animals neither seek a mate nor take care of young, existing only for their lone survival, the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility. (160)

Husband and children fishing together, are abandoned: for Maureen any fate is preferable to remaining one of July’s people, dependent upon a man who has seen her inner emptiness.

In a sense *July’s People* ends with Maureen betraying her family (and possibly her protectors, who would certainly be victimized for having sheltered white refugees were the helicopter manned by the black revolutionaries). The novel could therefore be aligned with many stories in her collection, *Something Out There* which are variations on the theme of betrayal. The danger of this reading of *July’s People* of seeing Maureen’s flight to the helicopter as a cowardly abnegation of her responsibility to her family and her protectors, is that it risks distorting the novel’s conclusion. The epigraph from
Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* – “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms” – alludes to the novel’s location in a moral and political intermission, during which customary relationships have been overthrown and new ones are still embryonic. *July’s People* indeed shows how Maureen and Bam, husband and wife, have changed in themselves and to each other. Maureen now sees Bam as a balding stranger, while to the latter his companion in the dusty hut is now merely

Her. Not “Maureen.” Not “his wife.” The presence in the mud hut, mute with an inactivity of being, of sense of self he could not follow because there were no familiar areas in which it could be visualized moving, no familiar entities that could be shaping it. With “her” there was no undersurface of recognition, only moments of finding each other out. (105)

Familiar names no longer operate in this defamiliarized world. Thus the man known for fifteen years as ‘July’ is recognized only as ‘Mwawate’ by the villagers; and Maureen and Bamford, likewise, lose the ability to call each other by the names that functioned so effectively back there.

In the second chapter the narrator remarks that revolution is accompanied by “the transformations of myth of religious parable” (9). Thus the Smaleses’ servant now becomes their saviour. His impoverished village their haven, the gaudy yellow bakkie the Ark in
which they escape the Flood. Maureen and Bam themselves are likewise transformed by the revolution, and it is therefore inappropriate to think of the former’s rush to the helicopter, the novel’s *deus ex machina* as a betrayal of relationships that no longer exist. The notion of treachery surely implies a table set of relationships within a firm, established social matrix, whereas the central point about *July’s People* is precisely that these stabilities have been fractured by the revolution. The Kloppers, the Afrikaner couple who rent the isolated farm to the A.N.C. couple for use as a base for sabotage in ‘Something Out There’ can only feel that they have been taken for a ride because they are unaware that the revolution overrides the old codes of trust and openness.

In *July’s People* the quest pattern is dramatically revised, as are the roles of Miranda and Caliban. The quest is recast as the flight of a suburban Johannesburg family for uncertain sanctuary in a village in the bush, during which the stories of black and white once again vie for priority. Initially it is the story of Maureen Smales which seems to prevail. Her recollections and subjective experience under the pressure of extraordinary events dominate the foreground of this spare novel, which is set not ‘in history’ but one step into an imagined future in which the revolution has begun in South Africa. The reader is told obliquely but decisively the story of July a domesticated Caliban who has spent fifteen years in the service of this Miranda. The novel turns on the reordering and reinterpretation of the relations between Maureen and July.
It begins with July once servant now host, offering Maureen the cup of morning tea in bed that opens the day for the English in Africa. Only the ceremony is familiar: the context is entirely changed. Maureen, Bam and their three children are housed in the hut of July’s mother in a poverty-stricken African compound six hundred kilometers from their pleasant Johannesburg neighbourhood. They are living in limbo, straining to catch the censored news broadcast from a hidden emergency station located somewhere in the world in flames they have left behind. The revolution is underway. At any moment Maureen and Bam expect to hear the fateful announcement: “This is Radio Anzania” (51). Lacking the conveniences that have always kept them always distanced from their own physicality, expelled by history from the “master bedroom” which has defined their marital relationship, and battered by the devastating stress of dependency, the family disintegrates. The children quickly ally themselves with their age-mates in July’s village, and husband and wife pursue, separately their own needs. Emotional bonds and loyalties dissolve.

Like Gordimer’s early fiction set in colonial South Africa, July’s People is a “master-servant” story, but with the power structure reversed in a world “jolted out of chronology” (4). Maureen frequently invokes for herself an earlier identity as ‘the shift-boss’s daughter’, in a bitter-sweet allusion to a childhood lived within the confines of a transplanted little Britain. To Maureen, being her father’s daughter signifies more than a heritage of complicity in the South African
system. As a liberal adult she considers her real patrimony to be a special saving knowledge of blacks she thinks others, her husband, for one, lack. Hers is a world in transition, however, where Prospero’s art is negated and all illusions are at an end. In the bush, in July’s village, Miranda/Maureen is nobody’s daughter. She looks to Caliban not only for safety but for the key to her own identity, past and present.

As in Burger’s Daughter, dormant paradigms for the outsider’s encounter with Africa again take on unholy life, converging in Maureen’s story with a logic of their own. While Bam tries to assuage his sense of powerlessness by hunting game for the community in a parody of the sportsman-adventurer, Maureen pursues her own adventure into alien territory. In the past she had occasionally toyed with the notion of a sentimental journey to bestow gifts on July’s people. Instead, she has embarked on a nightmare safari beyond her control, with no home to which to return. Disoriented, Maureen suffers the unpredictable emergence of new and old personae in a sequence dictated by kaleidoscopically shifting memories. Sometimes her father’s daughter, taking unconscious advantage of the servant girl who is also a childhood playmate sometimes the liberal mistress, convinced July is impressed by her willingness to do the rough work of gardening, she confronts past failures of imagination. They trouble her more than her current perilous circumstances. “They had nothing”, she discovers. “In their houses there was nothing” (29). Once accustomed to the darkness, her eyes are able to pick out the bit
of animal flesh or bone, the chalk and ochre design, the mirror or rusty medallion that constitute the stark furnishings of the village huts. What her life as the shift boss’s daughter had not prepared her for was the discovery of how little could be purchased by the labour of the miners who worked under him. The shabby treasures sheltered in the dim light of these dwellings are juxtaposed with her memory of the shelves cluttered with her girlhood possessions in the house in the mining town.

There are numerous other such double exposures in the novel as Maureen discovers the mutability and ethnocentricity of interpretations she had thought firmly fixed. Her liberal humanist creed is shattered and she is no longer certain what her story is or how to tell it. Over the years she had sent July’s wife gifts that “surely any woman, no matter where or how she lived, could use: a nightgown, a handbag” (16). Now, menstruating in rags that she washes in the stream like the other women, beyond concern about the danger of bilharzia infections (67) Maureen learns in the flesh what Rosa Burger had understood more theoretically. Not even the shared rituals of female physicality suffice to bring her within the ambit of the lives of these women, July’s other women. Like a bright, but faulty Jane Austen heroine, Maureen clarifies her vision and advances towards narrator’s perspective, one which underscores the play on “master bedrooms”, and the irony of this anti-pastoral in the bush. But for the education of Maureen to be the focus of the novel is a luxury bought once again at July’s expense. This more inclusive
irony, which remains outside Maureen’s comprehension, distinguishes
July’s People. Unlike writers in the classic adventure tradition, Gordimer neither ignores July’s story nor presumes to tell it. In a departure from her own previous work she structures this novel around the inaccessibility of this crucial story to whites of her time and place.

Part of July’s history emerges in the struggle with Maureen for interpretive control not only of the present but also of their mutual past. The white woman’s experience of Africa, a paradoxical blend of power and powerlessness, gives their verbal contest a large measure of its aura of violence. The black man’s rejection of his role as he enters into the new dispensation contributes the rest. July quickly perceives the manipulative arrogance implicit in Maureen’s insistence that they are now friends, not servant and mistress. Her attempt to coerce him into this new relation to satisfy her vision of herself deteriorates into their first fight, as Maureen, suddenly determined to draw blood, goads July to an angry honesty beyond anything he had allowed himself in the old life:

He had stopped instantly the blinking pantomime of derision. He might take her by the shoulders; they stepped across fifteen years of no-man’s land, her words shoved them and they were together, duellists who will feel each other’s breath before they turn away to the regulation number of paces, or conspirators who will never escape what each knows of the other. (72)
It soon becomes imperative to Maureen to reconstruct her history with him. Her interpretive skill, her ability to infer what remains unspoken between “people in the relation they had been in” (69), is called in question by July’s version of their past, but even worse is his indifference to her feverish alternation between self-justification and recrimination. Driven to touch the wound, to taste its essence in these new circumstances, Maureen continues to seek him out and provoke quarrels about their years together. They trade insults with the passion of intimates, but it is Maureen who is most intent upon getting a reaction. She is angered by even the slender ties of male companionship that link July and her husband. She wants to be first with July on the strength of her fifteen years of dealing with him every day, making allowance for his limited English, tending him when he fell ill, and taking special care, not to wound his male dignity. This self-conscious courtesy is itself a betrayal, tying Maureen inverted quest to “darkest Africa” to the miscegenation theme in which relations between white women and black men are read as parables of power. In July’s People Gordimer makes clear. While telling Miranda’s story, that none of these Eurocentric fictions, can encompass the stories of blacks.

Elaborating unintentionally the alternate meaning of ‘mistress’, Maureen makes July the object of her increasingly obsessive and eroticized attention in response to his new role as the family’s protector. Unable to abandon he own role in the colonial universe, she sheds the decorum that covers its inner logic. Beginning to read
portions of her story, she still cannot fathom July’s, although she continues to make stabs at comprehending it, in an attempt to understand why he rescued them from the apocalypse that enveloped the city. She has long understood that he is “not a simple man” (60). But he speaks a servant’s awkward English, and the narrator, rather than plumb his consciousness, simply registers its presence as a counterbalance to Maureen’s claims and selective memories. July resumes his position as paterfamilias and valued subject of his chief. His consequent inner transformation is in the man withheld from the reader as well as from Maureen. It is registered in several incidents where he assumes more authority over the Smales than they are prepared to concede, and is confirmed by the use of his real name, Mwawate.

When he finally chooses to speak out he does so, tellingly, in his language. In the midst of the third and last of the searing quarrels that flame up between the two, he responds to Maureen’s demands and accusations with the full force of his renewed authority. Their first fight ends with July deliberately retreating behind the mask of the good servant; the second ends inconclusively; now July, seated and at his ease, no longer the differential menial, instructs Maureen. Although she is unable to comprehend any of his words, she is certain of what he is saying. She understands now that her former regard for his sensibilities had been at bottom self-serving, forcing him to play his part in a way and left her comfortable with her own. She realizes that “to be intelligent, honest, dignified for her was nothing; his
measure as a man was taken elsewhere by others. She was not his mother, his wife, his sister, his friend, his people” (152). On this occasion July concludes his own revision of their shared history begun during their first argument. When he is finished he leans back, finished also with her.

A Miranda ignored by Caliban whose real life has nothing to do with her Maureen responds by staging a scene only she can read:

The incredible tenderness of the evening surrounded them as if mistaking them for lovers. She lurched and posed herself, a grotesque, against the vehicle’s hood, her shrunken jeans poked at her knees, sweat-coarsened forehead touched by the moonlight, neglected hair standing out wispy and rough. The death’s harpy image she made of herself meant nothing to him, who had never been to motor show complete with provocative girls. (153)

July, who now holds the balance of power, has no need to interpret her performance. His story lies elsewhere in this boundary fiction that gazes, like its title, in two directions: at the Smales who in fifteen years have not thought to inquire about his name, and at the people of his home, who have always known him as Mwawate.

Gordimer writes July’s story as perceived by Maureen and a narrator who shares her angle of vision if not her values. Simultaneously she signals the presence of a shadow story, companion to the one we are told. This austere novel reads like a
Gordimer maintains in her essay ‘Living in the Interregnum’, regarding the challenge raised concerning her ability to create black characters, that “there are things we know about each other than are never spoken, but are there to be written – and received with the amazement and consternation, on both sides, of having been found out” (The Essential Gesture ). At this point in the evolution of South African politics and literature she defends only this deliberately circumscribed vantage point. What we see of July is the fury of recrimination followed by withdrawal from any intimacy with the whites he has rescued: For the present when July resumes his true identity as Mwawate in Gordimer’s fiction, Sycorax’s son returns also to his mother tongue, no longer entrapped in the myths of Prospero’s daughter. It is a gesture which liberates Miranda from her role as well, although the novel’s conclusion, as ambiguous as its title, leaves open the question of whether or not Maureen understands this. July’s People is set in that “strange area” not in the heart of darkness which is the outsider’s Africa. Instead of appropriating black experience for the needs of her art, Gordimer succeeds in bearing witness to the story she cannot tell while at the same time freeing the life of the imagination from the unacknowledged impress of the past.

**A Sport of Nature**

Critic Dominic Head calls *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer’s most ambitious novel to date. It offers as its organizing principle, an
exaggerated re-evaluation of the issues and forms of her previous novels. This lends the book a ludic, metafictional quality which sets it apart from her earlier works (136).

Set against a background which embraces most of Africa and extends in time from the 1950s to an independent black South Africa in the near future, the novel returns to many of Gordimer’s key concerns. As a *bildungsroman* it shares its form with *The Lying Days*, *A World of Strangers*, and *Burger’s Daughter*; as a chilling dissection of South African bourgeoisie and a vigorous repudiation of reformist liberalism it recalls *Occasion for Loving* and *The Late Bourgeois World*. A mythic subtext offers obvious connections to *The Conservationist*, while the futuristic ending provides a counter-example to the apocalyptic vision of *July’s People*. As in *A Guest of Honour*, African nationalist politics are a major focus, with the emphasis falling more upon sexuality as innately radical. If the exploration of love, particularly family love, as a microcosm of political attachments, takes the reader into familiar territory, the picaresque mode of the novel represents a new departure. Since the structure of the novel and the major concerns it addresses reveal an intensified reconsideration of ideas previously addressed in the novels, it is metafictional in nature.

The novel is a feminine picaresque, detailing the adventures of a female picaro. At the same time it also a novel of adventure cast in the mode of colonial literature. White woman is always marginalized in the literature of imperialism. Fictional treatment of colonialism
feature male ‘adventurers’, which the daughters of Empire firmly relegated to a subordinate role. Newman says,

From the beginning of her career Gordimer has proceeded from a recognition of the complex interaction of gender with genre, so that . . . [the] novel provides a welcome corrective to literary and political readings of empire which concentrate exclusively on the male hero. *A Sport of Nature* focuses on a female ‘adventuress’ rewriting the meaning of the term to include sexuality with a positive hypothesis. (94)

Hillela, the heroine of the novel, is described by its title as a *lusus naturae*: ‘a plant, animal etc., which exhibits abnormal variation or departure from the parental stock’. ‘A spontaneous mutation’ a new variety of protagonist, she is a departure from the previous protagonists of Gordimer’s novels who have been variations of the notion of typicality. Hillela enters the novel as the child of an adulterous mother Ruth, who departs for Mozambique and a Portuguese lover, abandoning her daughter to the care of her two sisters, first Olga, arch-bourgeois representative of sterile world of expensive *objets d’art*, then Pauline, who is progressively embittered by her exclusion from the black world in which she formerly exercised her liberal conscience. Expelled from school in Rhodesia for consorting with a ‘coloured’ boy, Hillela returns to South Africa only to outrage her adoptive family norms by a quasi-incestuous affair with her cousin/adoptive brother, Sasha. Rejected by both sisters, this
latter-day Cinderella embarks on a series of adventures, appearing successively as a go-go dancer, the lover of a duplicitous white journalist, a beach bum in East Africa, the mistress of a Belgian diplomat (Tanzania) the wife of a black South African freedom fighter assassinated in Ghana and thence via Eastern Europe and an aid-related career in America to return to South Africa for its independence celebrations as the wife of the President of the OAU, General Reuel.

Hillela’s career is determined by her sexuality. Much of Gordimer’s work describes bodies, explores the role of sex in life and imagines the possibilities and difficulties of interracial sex. This crucial repetition is not a separation of private appetite from social choice. Barbara J. Eckstein states: “Examining the role of repetition in linking Gordimer’s esthetics to her politics and ethics, I find that private life and public life, desire and choice, are also inextricably linked (World Literature Today 7).” Edward Said in his essay ‘On Repetition’ describes Marx’s method of repeating in order to produce difference:

   Probably repetition is bound to move from immediate regrouping of experience to a more and more mediated reshaping and redisposition of it, in which the disparity between one version and its repetition increases, since repetition cannot long escape the ironies it bears within it. For even as it takes place repetition raises the question,
Like the *Occasion for Loving*, and *Burger’s Daughter*, the sexual relations and sexuality of the heroine in *A Sport of Nature* form a strong locus of discourse. She becomes attached to, or is the focus of desire for a series of men in various situations, initially in South Africa, but subsequently abroad.

The narrative technique of the novel is highly unusual. Throughout Hillela is viewed almost entirely from an external point of view. The narrator pieces together her history as if researching the biography of a public figure, admitting lacunae in the account, speculating as to motive, and tracking an evanescent subject through multiple changes of identity. Named in honour of a Zionist great-grandfather, Hillela shucks off her awkward forename to assume the protective colonial colouration of ‘Kim’, amidst the Susans, Clares and Fionas of her Rhodesian school. Reverting in South Africa to Hillela Capran she is later transmogrified into Mrs. Whaila Kgomani, and finally rebaptized Chiemeka which in Igbo means ‘God has done very well’. Gordimer uses intertextual elements by making fictional Rosa Burger walk in the hinterland of the novel which parades many famous, real-life personalities like Oliver Tambo, Tennyson Makiwane, Joshua Nkomo and Archbishop Joseph Tutu, all who add to the contemporary colour. The narrative technique is consciously Marxian, as Hillela changes according to the forces of circumstances and history. “The external perspective certainly registers the crisis of the
Liberal view of the individual subject, with its accompanying assumptions of the organic coherence of the individual, transcending social conditions” (Nadine Gordimer 95). On the other hand, as the narrator remarks, the gaps and silences in the life-story also associate Hillela, via similar lacunae, with the lives of individual heroes: “In the lives of the greatest, there are such lacunae – Christ and Shakespeare disappear from and reappear in the chronicles that documentation and human memory provide” (270). Indeed, her mysterious paternity, early abandonment, surrogate parents, expulsion as taboo-breaker, exile, wanderings, trials and triumphal return all link Hillela with the paradigm of the mythical hero. A strong mythical undertow runs as a subtext to the novel which teems with references to Greek tragedy, myth folk and fairy tales.

Gordimer employs Hillela to rewrite a male-centred myth, recasting a familiar western paradigm in female terms. In an interview Gordimer recalled that on their release from jail after Soweto black writers sparked off a resurgence of interest in black heroes of the past, who answered ‘a need for myths which fed fervour’. If the futuristic conclusion to the novel appears somewhat Utopian, it might be a deliberate strategy on Gordimer’s part – to compose an ending to encourage just such an ending to the present Republic of South Africa. Sasha in the novel comments: “Utopia is unattainable; without aiming for it . . . you can never hope even to fall far short of it” (217). Reuel’s African name is etymologically Utopian, given for ‘what the name will make happen’. Hillela names her daughter Nomzamo after
Winnie Mandela. The choice backfires into irony when the daughter rechristens herself Nomo to become a model. Throughout the novel Gordimer provides both occasions for fervour, and for irony, in the recognition that irony is the price of aiming high. The reportorial voice of the narrator, laboriously reconstructing past events, lends the novel a mock-historical tone, implying that only time will tell whether mock or historical should be the key emphasis. Hillela’s own elusive status thus offers a choice of potential stories – that of a quasi-mythical revolutionary heroine, or that of a sexual adventuress, at best the passive handmaiden of revolution. Similarly the naïve childish quality of Hillela’s political illusions appears to be highlighted in frequent fairy tale motifs: Hillela as Sleeping Beauty, as Cinderella rising from rags to riches via a succession of Princes, diverted from the ANC guerilla camp at Bagamoyo to visit an Arabian Nights hotel, gigglingly comparing the discovery of incest to the three bears: “Who’s been sleeping in my bed?” (A Sport of Nature 181). Similarly, African mythical elements also offer a choice between fervour and irony. Qamata, the Xhosa Supreme Being who rises from the sea and credited with supernatural powers is associated in modern times with the revolts in the Transkei of 1950s and 60s which gave rise to the Poqo campaign. Poqo, one of the largest black clandestine organizations of the 1960s had Qamata as its church. Qamata indicates the potential power of mythical symbols to be carriers of political change.
In *A Sport of Nature* Gordimer exploits both positive and negative readings of the power of myth. Whaila Kgomani is repeatedly described as god-like, “the disguised god from the sea”, “the obsidian god from the waves” emerging with his “water-smoothed head of antiquity” appearing from the waves like Qamata, who comes from the sea. Whereas Nkrumah, in whose land they seek asylum after a cholera scare, is destroyed by those very people who had declared him a god. Hillela realizes that the power on which Whaila rides is fundamentally unstable:

She suddenly understood fear . . . in the huge upheaval which she had placed herself astride as when a child she had revelled in the wild bucking of a playground’s mythical bull. Another had risen, out of the sea, Zeus disguised to capture Europa . . . and carried her off, clinging to its legendary black back. (223)

After Whaila’s death, Hillela, a tragic widow with a black child becomes an ‘ikon’ (321), of reconciliation between the Third World and the West, an image of reform rather than revolution. In Eastern Europe the ‘mythical wooden beasts’ of the children’s playground are furred with snow, the only hero (Karel) aged and bypassed by events. Sensually Hillela appears to be frozen, until her encounter with Reuel, which has the effect of resexualization and repoliticization. Significantly the couple come together after an accident in which their car skids, wrenching Hillela off course, “as if on the stirrup of a bucking monster” recalling the image of Zeus and Europa. Sensually
reawakened, Hillela recommits herself to the violent African struggle, which culminates in the Independence celebrations at which the masses appear, “as it the ocean itself had flooded up from Table Bay” (351).

There is confluence of political and sexual radicalism in the novel. The implicit connection between sensuality and activism is related to the Utopian theme. As Sasha says,

> Instinct is utopian. Emotion is utopian. Without utopia – the idea of utopia – there’s a failure of the imagination – and that’s a failure to go on living. It will take another kind of being to stay on, here. A new white person. Not us. The chance is a wild chance – like falling in love. (218)

Though apparently growing into militancy through the force of historical circumstances, Hillela remains unconditioned by the family and outside the cultural norms of her native land, recreating herself at every turn to slough off successive lives and move on. Her self creation proceeds on grounds of instinct rather than ideology; her personality is of itself so luxuriant as to eclipse the attractions of material luxury. In the midst of the cruelty that is South Africa, individual love appears as selfish, while ‘brotherly love’ becomes an idea beset by sophistry, as Hillela's lovemaking with her demonstrates to her ostensibly Liberal family. Only sexual love remains as a touchstone of integrity, whether personal or political. In South Africa the laws that govern African lives are based on the body and therefore
have to be fought through the body. If there is a driving force which transforms Hillela’s picaresque adventures into a purposive quest it is the desire to follow her instinctive need for an erotic relation, and a family of a radically different type.

By accident of the early abandonment Hillela became an exile from childhood, and eternal guest of honour, going home in school holidays to a family location chosen arbitrarily for her by others. The abstract relations of her childhood free her “patricidal and infanticidal loves between parents and children” (332). Knowing her mother only as a sexual being through a discovered cache of explicit love-letters, she avoids the ‘Calvinism and koshering’ (59) of her mother’s background. Accustomed to displacement, she readily learns to move to successive postings for political reasons. For Hillela, “without a cause is without a home” (189). Quite interestingly, when she at last rediscovers her mother she makes not attempt to reclaim the abandoned relationship, or to discover the true identity of her father, having relocated herself within the family of the cause.

The central event of her youth, perceived by her aunts as a definitive breach of the taboos of the bourgeois family, is simply not incest for the unrepressed Hillela. It is an emblematic act providing a proleptic image of ‘children with the house to themselves’ in a future state of independence. It also poses the question of the relation between brotherhood and love. Pauline, Sasha’s mother a believer in brotherhood promptly expels Hillela from the family. Her emergent sexuality strips the family of its illusions, that there can be no family
for the whites when blacks are denied it. It also proves that Hillela cannot set up home again in the house where only white people could live. Whaila becomes her lover and brother to her in the great family of a cause. Whaila understands imperialism in familial terms, as originating in the interrelated monarchies of the nineteenth century and then with foreign national economies forming “the extended family of the West” (202). Judie Newman traces out,

Hillela’s evolution runs in parallel as she moves, less from lover to lover than through a succession of families as surrogate daughter and lover to the Belgian ambassador to whose children she is nanny, cousin and sister and a hopeful mother of an interracial ‘rainbow’ family with Whaila, thence to a narrow escape from reintegration into the nuclear model in America, to end up as one of Reuel’s three wives, in a non-matrilineal self-invented family paradigm based upon her protection and (it is hinted) seduction of Reuel’s son by another wife. (100-1)

Hillela’s own pride in Nomzamo depends precisely on a reversal of the usual parental feeling, a delight in not having reproduced herself all over again in another privileged white child. In Hillela’s view exclusive, individual love “can’t be got away with” (239). It is envisaged as fostering bourgeois counter-revolution in Eastern Europe. For Hillela, the only love that counts is the one owed to the hungry crowds. Her commitment to the extended family of African
nationalism develops from a clear eyed unsentimental perception of the economic reality of the ‘rainbow family’:

The real rainbow family stinks. The dried liquid of dysentery streaks the legs of babies and old men and women smell of their monthly blood. They smell of lack of water. They smell of lack of food. They smell of bodies blown up by the expanding gases of their corpses’ innards, lying in the bush in the sun. (260)

If Hillela eventually succeeds in combining a cause and a home, ironies nonetheless remain. The implicit connections with a children’s revolt of a more specifically political nature, and with the image of whites as child-killers in present day South Africa are made explicit in the fate of Sasha, Hillela’s male counterpart who remains caught in the tragic House of Atreus of his South African family.

Throughout the novel, Sasha has charted the horrors of repressive parentage. His pregnant school friend hangs herself, more afraid of parents than of death. Reformist Pauline shelters Black Alpheus, but disapproves of his marriage and children. When she discusses the problem with Sasha he comments succinctly, “Emasculate him”, impatient with adults who always knew what the children should do (60). For all her liberalism, Pauline’s mode of cultural house keeping maintains the status quo. When Sasha is imprisoned for political activism, he is kept incommunicado apart from permitted visits from his gorgon mother, who succeeds in reasserting the maternal role only through her son’s incarceration.
While she finds political acceptance once more, founding a committee of detainees’ parents and liaising with black parents’ committees, for Sasha it is like “like being thrust up back again into the womb” (328). He draws the moral in a letter which when it is read in the court, puts the parents as much as the son on trial:

> White kids are being killed in landmine explosions and supermarket bombings, on Sunday rides and shopping trips with their loving parents. The mines and petrol bombs are planted by blacks, but it’s the whites who have killed their own children. The loving parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. The white family tree. (335)

Interregnum has opened up. “We must continue to be tormented by the ideal,” Gordimer says in ‘Living in the Interregnum’ (The Essential Gesture 284) and in creating Hillela, she envisions a “new white person” capable of pushing past the barriers of apartheid.

Utopian interracial union that represents a new nonracial political state in A Sport of Nature enhanced by the interracial extramarital affair finds itself at the margins rather than the center of Gordimer’s next novel, My Son’s Story.

**My Son’s Story**

After Gordimer had abandoned her universalist, or trans-ethnic credo that any white writer could write about blacks as authentically as blacks do, she had been chary in depicting blacks from their
personal consciousness. Yet since 1960s, Gordimer had been travelling away from fictional depictions of the potential of paternalistic liberalism and towards an imaginative depiction of a revolutionary overthrow of South Africa’s oppressive system of apartheid. Nonetheless she has been accused of failing to depict the experience and inner life of black and coloured people in South Africa. In *My Son’s Story* Gordimer finally overcomes her diffidence and hence this is her first novel to present a coloured male protagonist.

In *July’s People* she had predicted the dissolution of the white minority rule in the land. But the novel while narrating the tale of the white woman and her inability to speak the language of those who had rescued her, and in short, understand them, had denied the protagonist as well as the reader access into the psyche of July and his people. *A Sport of Nature* had on the other hand had tried to forge a bond between the black and the white. But this bond was mainly on the physical level, when the heroine gains access to the black world through her sexuality. In short, the communion occurs only at the physical level. *My Son’s Story*, Linda Weinhouse suggests, is the deconstruction of *A Sport of Nature* (66). Gordimer’s protagonists, even in her later novels, are nearly always women failing in their struggles to master the moral dilemmas inherent in being white in South Africa. Though Gordimer certainly includes black characters throughout her fiction, her perspective is consistently bound by her own experience. Of Gordimer’s novels, only *A Guest of Honour, The Conservationist* and *My Son’s Story* have male protagonists and give
us the male perspective. But the heroes of the earlier two novels were white and bound by the masculine illusion that sexual potency makes a man more effective as a public figure. In this context, the narrative voice of *My Son’s Story* is unique, for it is the voice of young coloured male and does challenge the masculine illusion. Gordimer succeeds in speaking in the voice of a non-white outside her own privileged enclave.

It is paradoxically in her imaginative creation of the voice of the “other” that she carves out a non-bodily role for whites at least for writers, within Africa today. The narrative creates an analogy between Will the narrator and Gordimer the author. Will is excluded from the black struggle in *My Son’s Story* both because he is coloured and because of his peculiar position within his own family. Gordimer has marginal status as a white writer in a country where black writers are increasingly writing about themselves. (67)

The story that Will tells us is both the result of exclusion from the political struggle in which his father is engaged and his gift to his father and the struggle. Gordimer’s success in imagining this narration is a validation of her role as a white writer in the struggle from which she is, in so many ways, excluded and her gift from the margins that she occupies, to that struggle.

*My Son’s Story* continues with her preoccupation with the interpellation of black and white bodies. The issues taken up in
Occasion for Loving, The Late Bourgeois World, and A Sport of Nature based on the Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 which was hell bent at solving the *swart gevaar* (‘Black danger’ in Afrikaans) by proscribing sexual intercourse across racial lines, are resumed in My Son’s Story. A simple tale of cross-racial love-affair that turns adulterous and its destructive fall out, the novel gains its power from the new artistic direction that Gordimer had taken. The story, as the self-reflexive title suggests, is told by the son Will about his father Sonny. A self-conscious, metafictional work, it is aesthetically a true representative of Gordimer’s post-modern phase. Through the authorial persona of Will – the son whose story it is – the novel offers a bleak indictment of a traditional ideology of the ‘improving’ function of literature, an indictment which also raises crucial questions about the possibility of intervention through artistic production (Head 151).

In the essay “Nobody’s Children’: Families in Gordimer’s Later Novels’, John Locke speaks about the two obsessive concerns of Gordimer’s fiction. The first concerns the quest of the White South African protagonist to find a way to identify with the African World. The second deals with paternal domination. According to Locke these two concerns are satisfactorily resolved in her final novels. The white privilege which Jessie Stilwell describes as “a silver spoon clamped between your jaws” (Occasion for Loving ) is resolved when Rosa Burger ends in a prison with black and white women where she says “My sense of sorority was clear” (Burger’s Daughter 332). The other, the obsessive compulsion to escape from paternal bondage, a
throwback from Gordimer’s own life which was throttled by her possessive mother, is finally eroded in *A Sport of Nature*. Locke further says that though mother-daughter stranglehold form a persistent theme in many of her novels, conflict-filled father-son relationship also forms an important concern in her novels *The Conservationist* and *My Son’s Story*. In the masculine version of paternal dominance as in the feminine, Gordimer has been drawn to the most extreme conflicts.

The book’s epigraph is from Shakespeare’s sonnet 13 which adds to the ambiguity of the title: “You had a father; let your son say so” (n.pag.). In the context of the sonnet it is clear that a father’s story can only be told by his son, but this narrative has its origin in the absence of the father. Only the son, who must imagine his father’s life from which he is excluded, is able to record and validate that life.

The son Will, named after William Shakespeare, surprises his father out at the movies with his white mistress and subsequently hides his knowledge from his mother. The father is active in the fight against apartheid and his mistress aids political prisoners. The boy spends his time imagining his father’s clandestine political and amorous activities until the surprising conclusion which reveals that ails, the boy’s mother, probably in conjunction with his sister Baby, has been involved in militant resistance to the government while her son and husband took her submissive, stay-at-home persona at face value. Aila is arrested, the mistress leaves the country as she
planned, to work with refugees elsewhere in Africa, and the father and son continue to live in uneasy alliance.

On one level, *My Son’s Story* is yet another re-enactment of the Oedipal theme. In the novel a son quite openly challenges his father’s right to woman; he triumphantly declares at the end of the novel that his father, who is turning fifty-two must now yield the role of a lover of women to his more virile son. Yet the question as to whose story it is, does not elicit a satisfactory answer. In the novel, the father is called Sonny and his given name is never mentioned. The son Will’s voice carries through out the narrative performance, but the possibility of a narrative ventriloquism cannot be ruled out. The narrative voice in *My Son’s Story* is rendered ambiguous by the pronoun of the title which suggests that the novel is composed by the father in the voice he imagines for his son. The first two lines of *My Son’s Story* read: “How did I find out? / I was deceiving him” (3). The pronoun ‘I’ refers ostensibly to the son and ‘him’ to the father. But since there is no antecedent of these pronouns it is not altogether clear that the son is the one described as deceiving the father, especially since the novel deals obsessively with the betrayal enacted by the father. And a few lines later, Gordimer makes the irony of this reversal complete when the narrator remarks: “There was my father; the moment we saw one another it was I who had discovered him, not him me” (3).

The novel in which the son’s story and the fathers’ are inextricably linked, seems to provoke the Lacanian question: “What does it mean for the father to be the subject of a narrative?” (qtd. in
Weinhouse 70) On the final page of the novel Will claims that it was his father’s actions, and at the heart of his father’s actions lies his father’s betrayal, that made him a writer. It is only in his words that he claims, ironically, he cannot publish, that his father breathes. In a reversal of biological primacy his words make his father’s flesh. Gordimer applies this Oedipal displacement to both biology and politics. In that final chapter Will writes: “But I’m young and it’s my time that’s come with women. My time that’s come with politics” (276).

It is the initial absence of his father, it is Sonny’s absence from home, that Will is called upon to compensate for, that spurs Will’s desire for the father’s function. And in his absence, Will, the child become the embodiment of knowledge about the father and the absence associated with him. Will is the only one who ‘knows’ where Sonny can be found. It is an interesting point that since absence can be indicated in complex and indirect ways, as in the loss of power and authority, the passivity that sons are forced into by the fact of paternal absence tells something further about narrative structure: just as they are passive in relation to an absent father, “the development of narrative likewise is fully dependent on the structural absence that initiates it”. Will is passive in the face of his father’s absence; he thereby gains his narrative voice. Similarly, they are both powerless in their own country, but Will’s narrative will also immortalize their struggle for autonomy in their own land. An analysis of the functional father Gordimer creates in this novel reveals
both an allegory of succession in the real politik of South Africa today and Gordimer's answer to the narrative problem presented by her own isolation from the voices she wishes to bear and record. When Will’s time comes with politics it will be in a vastly different political climate than the one which determined the nature of his father's struggle. His ability to record his father’s struggle in a way which even the man who lived it cannot, suggests that a writer who is marginalized by his or her own race such as Gordimer, can tell of the struggle against the true forces of society.

Despite the fact that the narrative demonstrates that the voice of the “other” can be heard and imagined, Gordimer’s attitude towards her own whiteness in this novel is resentful and hostile. Hannah, Sonny’s mistress is a white woman with a Hebraic name, an intelligent version of her predecessor Hillela, and she shares many of her qualities. She too exists primarily as a sexual being and she shares with Hillela the propensity and ability to move on. She leaves sonny to do refugee work in a position which will enhance her prestige, and after a short time all correspondence from her ceases.

Thematically the family is split apart when Sonny has the love affair with Hannah. “His attraction to Hannah belonged to the distorted place and time in which they all – all of them – he, Aila, Hannah, lived” (241). From that moment on, although he continues to have sex with his wife from time to time, his absence/presence in the house, his continually being in and out – is consistently interpreted by his son as a betrayal. The father’s absence home creates a void and
prepares for the final split up of the family. Appearance and reality, “acting” a part, point to the discrepancy between being and faking: “He goes out, away, and when he comes back, walks in, does the things he used to . . . he is acting. Performing what he used to be.”

(43)

Will condemns Hannah as the one vulnerable spot in his father's otherwise irreproachable commitment to his people's struggle for equality. Sonny's involvement with her, though it leaves her unscathed, destroys his family and his status within the party. Will's denunciation of her influence may be attributed jealousy, but some comments are too authorial in its sardonism.

Sonny makes love to Hannah under the misconception that they are birds of a feather. He believes that the joy he finds with Hannah is the “ultimate joy of making love with someone, who too, is in the battle” (67). The irony of his self-deception is that she goes off to join other battles and had he stayed to love his own wife, he would truly have had a lover in the battle, a lover of his own colour. The attraction Sonny feels for Hannah is repeatedly evoked by the phrase, “Needing Hannah.” As Hannah is the only representative of whites in the novel, who is mentioned by her name, then in the context of the novel ‘needing her’ brings with it joy and destruction, a false sense of shared purpose and ultimately a falling short of purpose.

Adultery constitutes the ultimate development in a process of evolution Sonny has undergone. The father image is directly linked with separation. As a bright, coloured child Sonny was allowed
instruction. He gained access to a status superior to the one usually enjoyed by “his kind”. Although grateful to his family, he remains separated from them by an invisible barrier, that of education.

The boy was the first in the family to leave earth, cement, wood, kapok behind and take up the pen and the book. He was the first to complete the full years of schooling. Sonny became a teacher. He was the pride of the old couple and the generic diminutive by which they had celebrated him as the son, the first-born male, was to stay with him in the changing identities a man passes through, for the rest of his life. (5-6)

He goes one step further when he engages in political action and metaphorically “crosses the veld”. The veld stands as a powerful metaphor in the novel and is ascribed various prepositions according to the circumstances: “across the veld”, “the other side of the veld, “over the veld” the family even holds picnics “on the veld” (37). This space stands as the no man’s land separating on the one hand coloureds and blacks and on the other hand, coloureds and the white town of Johannesburg. When Sonny ignores restrictions and accompanies the school children in their protest march across the veld, he steps out of the boundaries, starts on a path towards full commitment. This he fully achieves when he and his family move from their designated zone to one of those ‘grey areas’ newly made available to coloureds, namely a house in a white suburb:
We are going to move in among whites. It is a tactic decided upon, and I'm one who volunteered. If you agree.

. . . It'll be in one of the southern suburbs, of course, not where the well-off whites live. Working class Afrikaners want to move up in the world and they'll sell for a high price (41)

Sonny had first been sent to prison when he had become too prominent a political figure. Numerous allusions to physical obstacles between family and prisoner appear in the text: “the barrier of the witness box” (52), “shut away in a cell” (53), “to connect” (49). The prisoner has to resist an impulse to jump the barrier to join his crying daughter.

Political commitment is the basis of the separation of the family which is the constantly pervading theme of Gordimer’s other novels and short stories, the intricate combination and unalterable weaving together of political and private matters. In South Africa commitment means devotion to the cause and forsaking one’s right to private life. A fractured society, South Africa is divided according to its ethnic groups and economic status. The result of such a schizophrenic society is a divided self. The text is broken into sentences which consist of small units separated by punctuation marks:

I'm not a child. If people come out of prison, if they've been lopped off, lost; there’s love. Isn’t there? It is a way to make up for anything, so people say, from the time you
are a kid. Adults. In church, in school; in sex magazines.

How to love, all kinds, all love. (46)

In the same way analysis reveals that My Son’s Story is fragmented into a number of small introductory paragraphs preceding longer fragments that introductory lines often appear at the beginning of the chapters:

How did I find out?

I was deceiving him.

November. I was on study leave – for two weeks before the exams pupils in the senior classes were allowed to stay at home to prepare themselves. I would say I was going to work with a friend at a friend’s house, and then I’d slip off to the cinema. (3)

Thus typographical blank spaces and printed spaces alternate in the same way as different typographical types do: italics, capital letters, standard letters.

The novel itself as a genre is shot through with elements familiarly associated with the media, such as the political slogans. The message printed on stickers is integrated in texts as well:

Will, put on a tie.

God bless Africa.

I (heart shaped icon) Kaiser Chiefs

I stared at the back of his head on that drive and every thing inside me shut down. I didn’t think of her, I was
aware only of what was outside me. The stickers on the combis that cowboy lawyer raced and repassed. Sting and The Genuines playing on tape. . . . (231)

Headlines in the papers spell out the family’s misfortune:
HANDGRENADES IN GARAGE HOUSEWIFE LIVING ILLEGALLY IN WHITE SUBURB ALLEGED HARBOURED TERROR CACHE.

T-shirt mottos appear: An Injury To One Is An Injury To All. These slogans, placards, and head-lines produce an effect of immediacy, creating a referential illusion which offers true-to-life appeal to the reader. This is enhanced when the whole content of Sonny’s speech at the Blacks’ funeral is inserted within the text spelled out in italics (113-114).

The final mix of genres and media is achieved when Will inserts a poem of his in the last pages of the novel (276-77). The book continually alternates between the political novel as a genre and the bildûngsromän as it deals with the awakening of young soul in front of a chaotic seemingly senseless world.

Fragmentation appears in a striking way at the level of narration as well. The book is composed of several narratives. One narrative instance is a narrating “I”, assumedly Will as a teenager experiencing a crisis in his life. The character is the focalizer seeing what he should not have seen – his father’s adulterous liaison – a fact reminiscent of the Freudian primal scene.

The novel also offers the account of seemingly extradiegetic or heterodiegetic narrator mainly preoccupied first with Sonny’s story
with Aila and family and then with Hannah and political commitment. The two narratives alternate, the second one bringing in information inaccessible to the first-person narrator. Yet in the very last chapter the keys to the two narratives are given by an extradiegetic homodiegetic narrator who reveals that the “editor” for the two narratives is the son Will who has become a writer, thus achieving the ideal his father had set for him. He explains in a meta-textual passage that he made up what he did not know of – namely his father’s story:

In our story, like all stories, I have made up what I wasn’t there to experience myself. Sometimes – I can see – I’ve told something in terms I wouldn’t have been capable of, aware of, at the period when it was happening: the license of hindsight. Sometimes I can hear my voice breaking through, my judgements, my opinions elbowing in on what are supposed to be other people’s. (275)

The isotopy of fragmentation present at all levels of the book is finally integrated with a self-reflexive image and points to a cohesive element, Will. A series of echoes recalls a thematic link which paradoxically constitutes a factor of unity in this chaotic world. Once lost in what seemed like hall of mirrors, Will eventually finds an identity through the medium of creation. His book establishes a continuity between his younger self and his mature self, between past and present, between father and son. The family is reunited thanks to
the ‘story’. The fact that the narrator/editor points to the wholeness at the end of the book establishes this fact definitively.

*My Son’s Story* is first of all the story of a father and a son. The strategy of alternate narration accomplishes this. Furthermore, the father is nicknamed Sonny. As Liliane Louvel says, father’s name graphically illustrates the splitting apart of name and surname by a nickname (33). Being Sonny, he is epitome of fatherhood and filiation. In the third-person narrative dealing with the father’s story Will is referred to as the son, thus lineage is asserted; the son is the mirror of the father-Sonny. At the end of the book the alleged writer is the son writing for his father: “I’ve sent him this but I don’t know if they’ll give it to him. It’s not Shakespeare anyway . . .” (276). And the poem follows. The book should then be named *My Father’s Story* yet it is named *My Son’s Story*. This brings in the effect of “mise en abyme” as the text emphasizes the fact that the possessor of the book and ultimate “editor” is the father reading his “Son’s Story”, his side of their relationship.

The complexities of the narrative levels already employed by Gordimer in *The Conservationist* – without the final reunion of the texts – the references to discontinuity and fragmentation in space, private relationships and political commitment as well as social life, once again coherently and consistently pose the South African dilemma as a problem of space and co-habitation. This book further explores the disintegrating process of South African society ‘in the Interregnum’ weaving together threads of previous works, sending
back echoes, reinforcing the cohesion of Gordimer’s literary production and personal form of commitment in a manner similar to Will’s declaration: “I’m going to be the one to record, someday . . . what it really was like to live in a life determined by the struggle . . .” (276).