part in the political struggle or by finding their moorings in relationships. Lives converge through the meaning derived out of responsibility shouldered or through clarity of thought gained in relationships. The perennial conflicts in society and the evolving self are rendered artistically through the myriad forms of Gordimer’s narrative techniques. The content and craft of her fiction synthesise so naturally, that it necessitates a brief examination.

Chapter – VI

SYNERGY

Matter and expression are parts of one; style is

thinking out into language.

--Cardinal Newman

A writer’s sensitivity is shaped largely by his/her environment. Formulating observation by means of words is a challenging artistic exercise, and every writer has his own unique way of presenting the world he creatively renders. Novel is one distinct art form that possesses the ability to depict the varied social world that gives rise to it. Nadine Gordimer’s greatness as a novelist lies as much in the perspective she provides as in the literal truth of the situations she presents. Gordimer’s recreation of South African history and identity can be discerned in the narrative frame through which she presents the various stories. Mieke Bal has stressed that “whenever events are presented, they are always presented from within a certain ‘vision.’ A point of view is chosen, a certain way of seeing things,
a certain angle, whether real historical facts are concerned or fictitious events” (100). The socio-political nature of her novels does not detract from their aesthetic worth. She often displays alternating points of view that show from very different perspectives how people were influenced by the polity of South Africa. In an analysis of the evolution of Gordimer’s novels, Bruce King asserts that we can see how “the novel form evolved to become increasingly ‘post modern’ and multi-voiced” (3).

The narrative structure of Burger’s Daughter is divided into three parts each comprising a third person narrator and Rosa’s first person address to Conrad, Colette and Lionel successively. This device supports multi-voiced narrative strategy of the whole story. The third person narrator weaves a fabric of varying public and private modes of perception. In the first person narration, Rosa holds unspoken conversation with three absent narratees, because, as she herself explains: “one is never talking to oneself, always one is addressed to someone” (16). In the first section, she converses with Conrad, a friend and lover. In the second section, she converses with Katya (Colette Swan), her father’s first wife, or with her lover Bernard. In the final episodes back at South Africa, she addresses her father Lionel again. The link is renewed as she resolves to follow his political steps. In this frame, “the outer world of South Africa and the inner world of Rosa’s direct apprehensions of it—or Gordimer’s textual representation of it—have become indistinguishable” (White 223).

The narrative strategy highlights how in spite of initial resistance, the pressure that ideological and social forces exert on the individual make inevitable the
acceptance of that political commitment. The alternation between first and third person narrative creates a tension that is echoed in the novel as “the tension between creation and destruction in yourself … wandering between your fantasies and obsessions” (47).

Gordimer uses multi-voiced discourse again in her later novel, My Son’s Story. It explores the intersection of Will’s private life with his father’s commitment to the political struggle. The son tells the story of his father from two different perspectives. Will’s adolescent voice in the present tense alternates with a more mature voice that speaks in third person in the past tense. This second voice is that of Will himself, years later, when he has become a writer. These two voices reflect the moral complexity of the father-son relationship that makes Will a writer. The storyline of the narrative focuses on the affair between Sonny and Hannah Plowman. The novel opens with the fifteen year old Will’s discovery of this affair. Will’s discourse begins as a story of disillusion. The disillusion is manifested in the narrative perspective from which the story is told. Gordimer sketches it step by step, in the present tense account of the adolescent Will. This is also reinforced by an omniscient narrator who gives steady revelations of the happenings in Sonny’s life.

In the omniscient section of the novel, Will focalizes through varied characters. At times the point of view is Hannah’s and other times, it is Sonny’s. It is only at the end that Gordimer does reveal that the only narrator of the novel is Will—a voice that evaluates and formulates. This narrative technique is highly commended:

It’s a brilliant device: the novel becomes not a series of internal
monologues, but the effort of the family’s most articulate victim to conjecture, to comprehend, what really happened to them all. It turns a bleak ending into one that suggests how social as well as personal redemption may lie in acts of selflessness, empathy and forgiveness. Writing the novel was such an art. (Flower 322-23)

Regarding employing varied perspectives in a novel, Marjorie Boulton states: “Telling a story from several points of view has obvious possibilities for representing characters in depth, or the ambiguities of life: it can thus add verisimilitude, constitute large-scale ironies and perhaps give the relief of variety” (40). This is true of Gordimer’s complex use of the fictional form. In her works, the recurring patterns of language combine with shifts in narrative perspective or voice that creates extraordinary richness and cohesiveness.

The narrative in July’s People is told from a third person point of view. The tone of the narrative voice is that of dispassionate documentation. The activities and behaviour of the characters as they adjust to their new state is reported. The penultimate point in the novel is set in the narrative present: “she runs” (195). Recognising Gordimer’s temporal device, Stephen Clingman points out: “What appears to be a projection from the present into the future in the novel is from another point of view, seeing the present through the eyes of the future” (201-2).

Earlier, when the omniscient narrator follows the Smales’ family into July’s bush village we are taken into “the subsistence poverty of rural black life, the unintelligible language, the customs, suspicions, the reversals of role, and the increasing complexity of relationships between July and the white family”
In The Lying Days, Gordimer employs the mode of ‘Bildungsroman’ or the novel of education. It is a popular form of storytelling whereby Gordimer bases the plot on the overall growth of Helen Shaw throughout the timeline of the story. Helen undergoes noticeable mental, physical, social and emotional growth as the story progresses. To Robert Green, it is a novel charting youthful growth that, despite Helen’s lack of ambition, recalls Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers (546). The first person narration presents Helen drifting through relationships and it is only when political violence impinges upon her that Helen recognises the need to pursue her independent but socially committed life. Helen’s voyage out of Africa is followed by Toby Hood’s voyage into Africa in A World of Strangers.

Toby Hood docks at Mombasa en route to Johannesburg. The first person narrator then takes the reader into the world of townships—the urban areas where blacks lived in the short period of multi-racialism associated with Sophiatown in the mid-1950s. In Get a Life, Gordimer offers information on ecological activism in contemporary South Africa, through the stream of consciousness technique. The narrative technique in the novel enables Gordimer to enter her socially privileged character’s subjectivity while also maintaining a distance from it. Possessing extraordinary power and acuity, Gordimer is adept at delineating the relationship between the personal and the political. It is this interweaving of the private and the public aspects of life that endows richness and variety to her plots. What Amanor Dseagu stated regarding the similarity of plot structure of the
modern novel in Africa and the folktale, is relevant to Gordimer’s plots:

the beginning of the fiction almost always takes place in the home
because the home tends to function as the place of birth and place of
innocence. As the individual enters puberty, he begins to encounter
experiences that involve life away from home. This second stage of
the rites of passage is marked in the folktale by a withdrawal from
home by the hero; the difference, however, is that here the
withdrawal is into the city or large town where the hero loses all sense
of identity….Finally, having learnt a lesson from those new
experiences, the hero might return home a mature person. (593-94)

Gordimer’s protagonists like the hero of a folk tale leave their abode only to return
after being enriched with diverse experiences. Be it Helen Shaw in The Lying Days,
or Rosa Burger in Burger’s Daughter, they either resolve to return or eventually
return to their ‘home’—their place where they ‘belong.’ Julie Summers, too, in
The Pick Up, leaves her fractured home and having found a ‘real’ home elsewhere
in an alien land decides to stay there. Likewise, Paul Bannerman in Get a Life,
comes back to his home ‘as a mature person’ after venturing forth on a reflective
and meditative journey within the recess of his mind.

The plot in The Lying Days has an autobiographical strand. As in the case of Helen
Shaw, Gordimer grew up in a mining town, attended the University of
Witwatersrand and in her youth explored the social world of Johannesburg.
Helen’s maturation from a state of ignorance in the confines of the Atherton Mine
to a state of awareness through her relationships with Ludi Koch, Joel Aaron and
Paul Clark forms the simple plot of the novel. Helen’s liberal convictions mature through the story. Her journey into the native townships and her friendship with her black peer Mary Seswayo, broaden her political consciousness. A nation-wide mine strike in which her lover Paul Clark is involved forms the socio-political climax in the novel. Helen observes for herself the mindless violence of the townships that finally opens her mind to her own meaningless existence.

A World of Strangers is an explicit social commentary, as its plot is a conscientious reminder of the racial inequality that the then South Africa depended on. Toby Hood lands in South Africa absolutely indifferent to the social situation. But Toby’s experiences with both wealthy Afrikaners and natives draw him out to confront his own lack of personal and political commitment. His initial apathy soon dissipates as he comes face-to-face with the horrors of apartheid. Gordimer’s presentation of the colourful, vibrant life in the townships adds to the richness of the plot as it is a vivid contrast to the lacklustre world of the whites.

Through the plot of July’s people, Gordimer examines the shallowness of the liberal whites’ ideology. In the wake of civil unrest in Johannesburg the Smales’ family flee the city and are forced to accept their long-time servant July’s charity. While in July’s village, the Smales live a life that makes them confront all assumptions about one another. Gordimer examines the Smales’ relationships within the family and with the people in the village, highlighting the impact of race consciousness on individual’s views of each other. The story progresses slowly by showing how the Smales settle into their new way of life. While the Smales’ children adapt and make friends in the new village community, Maureen finds it
almost impossible to reconcile herself to her lot. They sleep on a car seat, eat pap amid bugs. But towards the end, Maureen can bear no more: “She was stampeded by a wild rush of need to destroy everything between them, she wanted to erase it beneath her heels as snails broke and slithered like the shell and slime of rotten eggs under her foot in the suburban garden” (152). Gravitating around Maureen the plot shows how, unable to ignore the past, she hopes to flee into an unknown future by escaping her present.

Burger’s Daughter revolves around Rosa’s evolution as a young revolutionary who attempts to uphold her father’s legacy while carving out her own sense of self. It is firmly placed historically with references to Sharpeville and SOWETO uprising and to the key-figures in the African National Congress. Delineating of the then turbulent political situation in South Africa makes Gordimer reflect on her own position as a white liberal. Rosa’s life as such is articulated through the South African political and social milieu. Presenting a facet in the history of the anti-apartheid struggle, Burger’s Daughter is considered as a coded homage to Bram Fischer, who was Nelson Mandela’s treason trial defence lawyer. The motif of prison figures in the novel, as Rosa, who flees her family’s political heritage, is inevitably drawn back into it and ends in prison.

In My Son’s Story, Gordimer weaves the plot around one man who gets involved in the freedom struggle and presents how his life and familial relationships change through his involvement in the struggle. Sonny is a school teacher by profession. He followed the political trials in the newspapers. But he is drawn into the world of politics when he leads a group of students who went on a strike seeking equality
and black solidarity. He develops an intimate relationship with Hannah Plowman that is expedited by their ideological similarity. The impact of this illicit love on his family and political work is focused in the novel. The circumstances that lead to his estrangement from his family and the repercussions that follow it are well-limned.

Gordimer presents an interracial love story in *The Pick Up*. The story begins when Julie Summers’ car breaks down and she begins a love affair with Abdu, an illegal Arab immigrant who works as a mechanic in a garage. She tries all possible means to avert his expulsion from the country, in vain. Against Abdul’s initial resistance, she accompanies him to his Arab country. The middle of the novel shows Julie quickly tuning herself to the new surroundings. She gets integrated into Ibrahim/Abdu’s family and gradually discovers a mystical bond with the desert. In a climatic ending, when Ibrahim finally gains a permit to immigrate to the U.S., Julie refuses to go along with him. There is also a sub-plot involving Julie’s uncle, Dr. Archibald Summers who gets falsely implicated in a case of sexual abuse.

Paul Bannerman’s recovery from physical illness and mental skepticism is traced in *Get a Life*. The close-knit relationship between the parents and the son is the highlight of the plot. Paul’s recuperation in the garden is presented, along with a parallel discussion of the impending destruction on the environmental front. Lyndsay’s four year extra-marital love affair is given its due prominence as later in the novel we find Adrian entering into a similar relationship with a much younger woman. The plot begins with Paul being diagnosed with radioactive cancer, moves along reflections on family and environment and ends with a
resolution of all doubts pertaining to marriage, family, man and nature.

Since plot revolves around characters, what is central to the fictional experience is characterization. The main objective of the creation of characters in novels is “to enable us to understand, and to experience people” (Henkle 86). Gordimer’s characters are so varied and complex that it may be said she sculpts her characters and not merely sketches them. Jeremy Hawthorn makes a pertinent observation in this regard: “characters are often created by novelists for purposes other than that of investigation into human personality or psychology. They can be used to tell a story, to exemplify a belief to contribute to a symbolic pattern in a novel or merely to facilitate a particular plot development” (49).

Gordimer’s characters are not static but dynamic. They are credible and are endowed with psychological depth. They mature in such a way that they get sculpted through experiences. From Helen Shaw to Rosa Burger, from Sonny to Julie Summers all the characters’ lives are closely linked to the larger fabric of the society. Melanie Kaye states that Gordimer’s “attention to insight, experience, and reaction is so intimate that her people seem embodied through the unfolding situation in which character does not so much reveal itself as emerge transformed” (10).

Ileana Dimitriu in “The Civil Imaginary in Gordimer’s First Novels,” perceives a “consistent and continuing writerly presence” (42) in the delineation of the psychological intricacies in Helen Shaw. From the beginning there is a mature reference in and about Helen. Gordimer as the author injects an adult consciousness into Helen’s character. We see this in Helen’s perspective
‘analysing’ of her mother’s words regarding her wish to stay at home after her parents’ departure to the Recreation Hall:

    But her indifference was not real….My mother was not angry yet, still impatient … she had gone too far, and spoiled the effect. We all know that her afternoon ‘was’ ruined; that she was terrified and convinced that “something” would happen to me; that her stride to the gate was a piece of bravado that cost her more than it was worth.

    (LD 13-15)

In this passage we find the child’s perception of the mother’s discomfort, but the analysis of it and the vocabulary in which it is expressed is that of the adult. Helen is brought up in the conservatism and bigotry of the mining town. The colonial mindset that charges life in the Mine does leave an indelible mark in Helen. She rebels by joining a group of liberal bohemians and social workers in the University of Johannesburg.

Helen’s relationship with Ludi Koch initiates her awareness of her sexuality. Through Mary Seswayo she learns the privileges her ‘superior’ race has accorded her. The Marcuses’ relationship shed light on the disillusioning aspect of love. Her own love for Paul Clark teaches her the satiating nature of love that ultimately gives an air of meaninglessness to life. The dominant mother, the pliant father, and the subservient maid all help in the emotional growth of Helen. Among all her acquaintances, Joel Aaron is the one who facilitates her self-realisation. It is through him that Helen discovers an aspect of life that is wanting in her bourgeois Atherton family code. It is through the mature, balanced, well-meaning Joel
Aaron that Helen finds an intellectual approach to life that is not goaded by petty materialist pursuits.

Showcasing the racial politics of South Africa in the 1950s in *A World of Strangers*, Gordimer deftly delineates an array of characters from the ‘black’ and ‘white’ world. Toby Hood as the English publisher gets acquainted with the people belonging to the various communities of South Africa. He meets most of them at parties and a few at work. Freed from the progressive pressures of his English parents, he mixes with the insular, affluent whites. But his friendship with Steven Sithole has a deep impact on his personality. Steven was a “new kind of man, not a white man, but not quite a black man, either: a kind of flash—flash-in-the-pan—produced by the surface of the two societies in friction” (WOS 134). He is portrayed as a young man who breaks the rules without wanting to become political. Toby spends many nights roaming the African townships with Steven. Both seem to live private lives and to ignore politics. Steven gradually becomes Toby’s alter-ego.

Toby Hood first declaims: “I want to live! I want to see people who interest me and amuse me black, white or any colour. I want to take care of my own relationships with men and women who come into my life, and let the abstractions of race and politics go hang” (36). Later, he discovers through Cecil Rowe, Anne Louw, Steven and Sam that “politics inevitably intrudes into personal relationships” (Driver 39). Toby’s detachment and his role as an outsider are undermined by the death of his closest friend Steven. The vacuum created by Steven makes Toby rethink his neutral stance in politics. He realises how he had
indirectly contributed to Steven’s death by his non-commitment.

In this world of strangers some characters are merely sketched in like the black singer Betty Ntolo or the hunter John Hamilton. The wealthy Alexanders are stereo-typed. Miss McCann, a minor character is typical of many a white South African’s attitude. She resigns her job under Toby as she cannot bear to work for a white man who is friendly with blacks. She may be viewed as a foil to Anna Louw, the liberal Afrikaner.

In Burger’s Daughter, though the story is that of Rosa Burger, the real hero is Lionel Burger. He is a respected Afrikaner doctor who joined the Communist Party, worked for the revolution, was jailed and died in prison. The character of Lionel Burger bears a strong resemblance to the real life figure of Abram Fisher, one of the most prominent leaders within the South African Communist Party, upon whose personal history Lionel Burger’s career has obviously been based.

Gordimer’s admiration for Lionel Burger’s uncompromising revolutionary stand yields a fixed point in the narrative. “It forms,” as Kirsten Petersen states, “the moral backbone of the book, a para-metre of moral integrity against which every South African woman with aspirations to honesty can measure herself” (172).

Rosa grows in the shadow of her committed father and the fact that she is the daughter of Lionel Burger seems to determine her life. She is even named after the famous Polish Marxist Rosa Luxemburg, and her name also becomes an added burden for Rosa: seeking an identity of her own she enters into serious relationships. Rosa gains knowledge about the world and her own self from three totally different individuals—Conrad, a bohemian who questions truth; Colette, a
sensual who flees commitment; and Lionel, a self-assured revolutionary with a cause. All the three provide Rosa with a platform to reach herself out to those in need. Through the minor character Baasie, Rosa gains knowledge about the gaps that liberalism fails to address in its movement towards the future. While commenting on Gordimer’s characterisation, Dimitriu notes how Gordimer uses “a series of interactive relationships in which her protagonist is involved to give both solidity and variety to the scene” (43).

Rosa becomes Rose while in Nice and Colette names herself Katya like a Russian dancer. Colette/Katya is also Mme Bagnelli though she and Bagnelli were never married. The dream-like atmosphere of Nice is complemented by the past times of Colette’s sensuous acquaintances. Most of their times are spent on travelling, having picnics and going to beach. They “float capriciously from one activity to another and are never pinned down to specific, accountable positions of responsibility” (Liscio 255). In the company of Katya and her social circle, Rosa lives the life she wants to. She falls in love with a married French writer, Bernard Chabalier. She dons the identity of a French mistress thereby renouncing her identity as the daughter of a defiant communist. There is a circular movement in the characterisation of Rosa. Weighed down by the past, Rosa flees her country, enters into disillusioning relationships and returns to South Africa determined to make a difference.

In July’s People, Gordimer etches a powerful character study, showing the power plays between two classes of people and what happens to them when the balance shifts in a least expected way. The characters delineated are not predictable
stereotypes. In an atmosphere of cultural and physical displacement, Bam Smales loses both his masculine power and the prestige of his city profession: “And there, what was he here, an architect lying on a bed in a mud hut” (JP 98). Gradually he tunes himself to the unprecedented atmosphere. Unlike Bam, Maureen is thoroughly frustrated and feels vulnerable. In her interactions with July she is constantly interpreting and reinterpreting the other’s thoughts and language. The characters’ roles are reversed as the revolution makes the white masters solely dependent on their black employee. In contrast to July’s hospitality the Smales are unwelcome to the village community. As Martha criticizes, “Why do they come here? Why to us?” (8). But the black children freely move with the Smales’ children. Among the latter, Victor represents the materialistic whites who tries to impress the black children with his city belongings. He brings his electric racing car toy to the place where ironically there is no electricity. He is obsessed with showing his urban toy to the black children. He demands his mother, “but tell them they mustn’t touch it. I don’t want my things messed up and broken” (14). He even reacts with vehemence to the villagers using water from the tank. He insists, “It’s ours; it’s ours” (62-63). He does not seem to accept the fact that his parents are no more in positions of power.

Bam’s role as the sole owner of material goods is reversed when his last material possession viz. the gun is found missing. July starts driving the Bakkie without asking their permission. On one occasion when Maureen summons July to her hut to restart the hierarchical structure that characterised their earlier relationship in Johannesburg, July appears unhurried without any sign of former subservience.
July’s “refusal to ask for permission to use the car indicates his rejection of the Smales’ previous states as white bosses and a reminder to them that the old order is defunct” (Erritouni 68-69).

The evolution of Sonny’s character is realistically sketched in My Son’s Story. A dedicated school teacher, a devoted father, a loving husband, a powerful political speaker, and a secret lover—in Sonny one perceives many dimensions of his self. To Will, Sonny was his role model. But soon his perception of his father takes a turn when he bears witness to his adulterous relationship with a white woman. Sonny’s estrangement from his wife can be attributed to his intellectual bonding with Hannah. Both Aila and Hannah are a study in contrasts. While the former is inarticulate the latter is very expressive. While Aila confines herself to the domestic realm, Hannah reaches out to the desperate in society. The more Sonny is drawn to Hannah, the more Aila withdraws into her shell.

Baby, though a minor character, is used by Gordimer to show the effect of betrayal and disloyalty of a parent on the children. Unable to come to terms with her father’s deception, she becomes a revolutionary in exile. Unlike his sibling, Will does not flee from his father. He stays behind to record his life. Like the secret police, he monitors his father’s movements. Soon he learns to accept his father as he is, giving up his former spite for him. Aila’s character is powerfully rendered. Her ‘silence’ is the most articulate and forceful. Her taking recourse to the underground resistance politics does not come as a surprise. She who had been a pillar of support to her husband, naturally dons the role of a revolutionary. The
motherly care and tenderness that she exudes is remarkable.

In *The Pick Up*, Gordimer delineates two contrasting characters who are drawn together by the bond of love. There are differences between Ibrahim and Julie Summers not just in their cultures but between them as well. Julie is an upper class, liberal white woman who falls in love with a poor illegal immigrant, who is unable to love her as much as she does. Blinded by love, both do not know what is of paramount importance to the other. As Gordimer describes, “He sulks, or is it lonely sadness in that profile? She is distanced and distressed. Love engraves a profile definitely as the mint does on a coin. She is ashamed of her parents; he thinks she is ashamed of him. Neither know either, about the other” (PU 38).

While Abdu/Ibrahim seeks the success of life, Julie yearns for the solace of love. There is an undefinable space between them that spells their unique identities.

On arriving at the desert village, Julie is so taken up by the Orientalist images that she encounters firsthand: “her gaze darted everywhere about her” (111) but to Ibrahim, who loathed that familiar setting it is devoid of all joy, “it was as if he shut himself away from what he was navigating” (111). Drenched in the love shown by Ibrahim’s family, Julie realises that she has found her home and her family. The strong-willed girl that she is, she refuses to go with Ibrahim to the U.S. She knows full well that her husband’s choice was erroneous, and that he would continue to struggle in pursuit of the deceptive successful life while in reality joy and comfort lay in his own place. Gordimer gives an authentic portrayal of the Oriental woman in their veiled countenances exchanging pleasantry. Ibrahim’s mother’s character is an impressive one. In her one finds a fusion of dignity, piety,
responsibility and love.

Paul Bannerman, the protagonist of Get a Life, is an ecologist whose activism aims at helping the rural poor escape the harmful effects of industrialisation and development. All the members of the Bannerman family have tasted the fruits of globalisation. Paul himself had gone to England and West Africa to get his educational qualification. His sister Jacqueline is a Montessori nursery teacher. Susan is married to an ostrich farmer who prospers because of “worldwide demand for low-cholesterol steak” (GAL 35). Emma is a foreign correspondent for a British newspaper and lives in South America with her Brazilian husband. Paul’s wife Benni/Bernice works for a corporate industry. Paul’s parents Adrian and Lyndsay are emblematic of love and warmth. Their selfless love for their son is evidenced in their offering to take care of him in spite of the risk of exposing themselves to radioactive hazard.

Environment, the conservation of which Paul strives for, is a major character by itself. Nature as such is described as “the greatest scientist” (20). Bernice is portrayed as an emotionally strong and practical minded woman. She swims along the current of life without allowing herself to be drowned in the sorrow of her husband’s illness. The three-year old Nikkie is used by Gordimer to highlight the poignant as well as happy moments in the parent-child relationship. The two-year old Klara is a character of hope. She symbolises the possibility of life and living against all odds. The Norwegian guide though a minor character plays a major role. Her love for Adrian is a reflection of Lyndsay’s own extra-marital affair in the early years of her marriage. Thapelo and Derek, who are Paul’s colleagues
symbolise the breaking down of the black-white divide in the post-apartheid South Africa.

Conversations are used to throw light on character and carry the story forward. Since human relationships depend largely on communication that takes place chiefly through speech, conversation plays a significant part in Gordimer’s novels.

A conversation between Aila and Sonny may be used to illustrate this point:

I didn’t want to say in front of Will….He’s not a child. What’s the matter? What is it?….She’s expecting … so that’s the reason for the marriage. Oh. No….They would’ve married anyway. They love each other. Family life—babies—it doesn’t go too well with activism like theirs. Doesn’t really do, anywhere, but particularly in exile. Well, they have permission in the camp. She’s very pleased about the baby. You wouldn’t have thought she’d have such strong mental instincts, would you? When they grow up … what can one know about them.

(MSS 170)

The conversation highlights the mother’s understanding of her daughter that is far above that of the father.

The casual friendly chat between Steven Sithole and Toby Hood throws light on the sentiments that are innate in both the friends.

“He said,” we like to read the Russians. You’ll see, Africans want to read Dostoyevsky.”

I said, “You read that somewhere Steven.”

“Trouble with me,” he went on, “I don’t want to feel miserable. I
don’t want any glory out of it … I’m sick of it. Sick of feeling half a man. I don’t want to be bothered with black men’s troubles. You know that, Toby? .. ‘A private life,” I said. “That’s what you want” … “That’s it he said, “That’s it.” (WOS 102)

During the course of conversations Gordimer at times uses colloquialisms that are “common to black and white alike” (GAL 83). Phrases and expressions like “yona ke yona” (This is it) “phambili” (go for it) are strewn in Get a Life, that give a familiar and commonplace touch to the conversations.

The characters do not live independently of the society they live in. The impact of the environment or the background on the individuals is affirmed in Gordimer’s lucid descriptions of the setting. In her early novels, Gordimer uses landscapes to describe a world misunderstood by people outside Africa. It provides as John Cooke says, “background of self-knowledge” (534). Helen Shaw reflects that her world is not anything like the life of Africa, the continent, as described in books about Africa; perhaps further from this than from any. What did the great rivers, the savage tribes, the jungles and the hunt for palm-eared elephants have to do with the sixty miles of Witwatersrand veld that was our Africa? The yellow-ridged hills of sand thrown up and patted down with the unlovely precision that marked them manufactured unmistakably as a sand castle. The dams of chemical-tinted water, more waste matter brought above ground by man, that stood below them, bringing a false promise of a “river—a greenness,
a cool peace of dripping fronds and birds” (LD 96-97).

What is pictured here is a real wasteland created by the rich miners instead of the popular tropical paradise.

Descriptions of the white mine houses as having “fences” and “hedges” around them (LD 17) show the spatial boundaries that naturally foster physical barriers in the white man’s relationship with the blacks. The luxurious homes in the suburbs, cramped houses in the townships and the pulsating, teeming life of the shebeens are vividly described in *A World of Strangers*. Toby Hood moves around two worlds—the upper class milieu and the urban black community that presents the changing view of the South African landscape, that was then becoming as Paul Rich observes, “a man-made and artificial terrain emphasising the growing divorce of the South African urban culture from the pastoral countryside” (“Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction” 71).

Toby’s perception of the African continent is seen in his first glimpse of the African shore. He had initially associated Africa with exotic elements but later through his friendship with the natives he finds the ‘real Africa.’ The Sophiatown ghettos of Johannesburg depict a significant time and place in South African past. They were the hub of cultural activities led by black journalists, writers, jazz players and intellectuals. In sum, it was a centre for multiracialism where flouting all taboos middle class whites and blacks came together. Gordimer presents it as a counter to the lifeless white Johannesburg. Through the two strikingly different backgrounds, Toby discovers how the routine of the lives of the black and white man “might run parallel most of the time, but it was astonishing how effective were
the arrangements for preventing a crossing” (WOS 130).

Brought up in an atmosphere conditioned by responsibilities with no scope for sensual fulfillment, Rosa Burger goes to France. In Nice, in the house of Colette, Lionel Burger’s first wife, Gordimer presents a fairy tale setting. Through this place Rosa is introduced to the bourgeois life of sensual desires:

The silk tent of morning sea tilted, pegged to key hole harbours where boats nosed domestically like animals at a trough, Vauban’s ancient fort squatted out to the water; two S-shaped buildings towered were foreshortened, leaned this side and that of the wing, rose again. Lavender mountains with a snail-trail spittle of last winter’s snow swung a diagonal horizon across the fish-bowl windows. Down to earth, the plane laid itself on the runway as the seagulls (through convex glass under flak of droplets) breasted the sea beside it. (BD 214)

Here, we find Rosa exposed to a profusion of colours and scents. Set in South Africa between 1948, the year the first Nationalist government took office, and 1976, the year of the SOWETO student uprising, Burger’s Daughter juxtaposes this historical framework with Rosa’s personal history.

In July’s People, Gordimer presents the Smales’ life in a setting that is a far cry from the privileged, sophisticated life of the past. Bam and Maureen owned “a seven-room house and swimming pool” (JP 23). They could hire live-in servants, made frequent hunting trips and had “growing savings and investments” (8). But when the black revolutionaries attempt to overthrow the racist white government
of South Africa, leading to the outbreak of the civil war, the Smales are thrown into a locality of deprivation. There is no pastoral romanticising of the rural background in the novel. The tourist perception of tribal Africa is transformed through a realistic description of the peasant culture of the African women who work in the fields gathering in vegetables and mealies.

The sun brought the steamy smell of urine-wet cloth from the bundles of baby on the mother’s backs. The women hitched up their skirts in vleis and their feet spread, age coming up between the toes, like the claws of marsh-birds, walking on firm ground, the coating of mud dried matt in the sun and shod them to mid-calf. (92)

Maureen attempts to work like the native women in the fields but her efforts end in fiasco. Through the description of the rural backdrop, Gordimer seems to celebrate “the closer relationship enjoyed by the African village to the surrounding landscape than the more alienated culture of the Smales” (Rich 380). The entire novel presents contrastive physical conditions:

A seven room house versus a one-room hut, lavish food morning milk, tea and evening fresh fruit versus a meal of porridge and wild spinach, Bam’s bird-hunting versus wart-hog hunting for survival, playing with toys versus playing with nothing in the real wilderness ... and sense of power and ownership versus disempowerment and dispossession. (Khosnood and Talif 31)

The political environment that preceded the final dismantling of the apartheid system forms the setting of My Son’s Story. The apartheid South Africa is
portrayed as “a centripetal force that draws people … out of the fascination of commitment to political struggle” (MSS 88). Sonny lived with his family in a hovel in one of the indistinct townships, when he was a school teacher. But later they move in among whites in Johannesburg—this very act of shifting the locality suggests the defiance that overwhelms Sonny as he emerges as a thorough political activist. Sonny’s physical confinement in the prison parallels his emotional confinement in Hannah’s cottage. His frequent visits to Hannah’s ‘place’ lead to his total estrangement from his wife and family. The air of silence in the abode of Sonny is contrasted with the long hours of ideological and personal talk that envelops Hannah’s dwelling. The setting plays a significant part in the novel. While Sonny moved into a white locality to defy the whites, his visits to a white woman’s house, is presented as a foil to his own fragmented identity.

The Pick Up is Gordimer’s first novel that imbues the locality with significant global resonance. It unfolds in two locations—in South Africa and North Africa. Ileana Dimitriu is of the view that Gordimer presents the South Africa of today, “as both a microcosm of world forces and as a country collectively seeking a better understanding of itself” (“Postcolonising Gardimer” 166). By presenting part of the action in an unnamed Arab country, Gordimer explores new post-apartheid issues at home, like for example the politics of identity, home and exile. Commenting on the ‘dual’ setting of the novel, Emma Hunt opines “Gordimer sets up the desert in opposition to the global city the desert is contrary to accumulation, ambition or ego and represents instead scarcity and a corresponding spiritual purity” (110). After the breaking down of racial segregation, the city of
Johannesburg has evolved into a global city with its “expanding financial opportunities” (4).

In the opening scene of the novel, Gordimer presents the city as a predatory place defined by perennial movement unlike the stillness of the desert that she introduces later. When Julie’s car breaks down, “the traffic mob” that forms behind is described as “clustered predators round a kill” (3). Gordimer places Julie in three distinct places—the elite backdrop of the ‘suburbs’ represented by Julie’s well-connected father, the bohemian atmosphere of the EL-AY Café, and the desert village. The desert is painted as a place without boundaries and borders, a place “undisturbed by growth, even while you lift and place your feet it obliterates where they fall and covers their interruption as they pass on” (168). Like the sea, which Gordimer describes as having “its surface free, with crossings that have no frontiers” (84) it is not possible to create divisions in the desert. It is in the panoramic background of the desert that Julie discovers herself.

The milieu in Get a Life is Paul Bannerman’s childhood garden. It is the place where the microcosmic family is delineated against the backdrop of the global problems of environmental conservation. The garden is Paul’s retreat that brings back childhood memories, and makes him reflect on his current condition. It is a symbolic space in the novel that is occasionally referred to as “No-man’s-land” (GAL 30). It is “where the company of jacaranda fronds finger the same breeze that brushed the boy’s cheek” (54). When Paul muses on the possibility of divorcing his wife, the garden is hinted at in Biblical terms. We are determined
that “it was in the garden that expulsion came, once there was knowledge” (58). The garden is identified with the metaphysical notion of wilderness. In the narrative, Paul remembers the garden as his own childhood “wilderness” (50), where he and his friends played and fought each other. When Thapelo visits the garden, it becomes “the quarters now, where two men are absorbed in the work that informs their understanding of the world and their place as agents within it, from the perspective that everyone, like it or not, admit it or not, acts upon the world in some way” (83). It is in the garden that Thapelo brings a mangrove root from the wetlands and a piece of a bird eggshell which “would soon be extinct” (86). The visits to the zoo and the half botanical garden for indigenous African species towards the end of the novel throw light on the relationship between man and his environment. From the childhood retreat to the wildlife protection habitat the ‘green’ background is used to emphasize the lesson on the ‘morality of survival.’

The context within which the action of Gordimer’s novels takes place is not confined just to their geographical setting alone. The social and historical factors also play a significant part. In this realistic and conventional setting, Gordimer presents her major concerns. The recurrent issue in her early fiction is the moral and psychological tensions generated by the racially divided home country. Her changing responses to apartheid from that of a liberal to radical are the representative themes in her novel. They reflect her shifts in ideological focus. Endowed with an acute sense of history, her novels are contemporary. The racial prejudices and the separations in the society engendered by the country’s laws is
the dominant theme of her early novels, *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*. The theme of Burger’s Daughter is the difficulty experienced by Rosa Burger in defining an identity for herself through the emotion and political legacy that her father Lionel Burger had bequeathed her. *July’s People* focuses on the theme of displacement and reversals of power positions. Issues of adultery, betrayal and estrangement are coupled with politics in *My Son’s Story*.

In Gordimer’s post-apartheid novels like *Get a Life* and *The Pick Up*, we find the local concerns being taken over by global issues. In *The Pick Up*, Gordimer presents cross-racial relationship and thematic of love that transcends barriers. The complex dialectic between the local and the global is emphatically depicted in the novel. When Abdu takes Julie to the local market she finds alongside traditional merchandise, kitschy plastic utensils “decorated with flower patterns of organic ostentation that seemed tactless in a desert village” (*PU* 126). The impact of new technological forms of communications on the third world is seen in the desert village. Instead of the Muezzin announcing prayer time from the top of the mosque, “there’s now a recording and a loudspeaker” (125). Even the younger generations’ response to Westernization can be viewed in Abdu’s statement about his friends who prefer “change with a voice over the internet, not from the minaret a voice demanding to be heard from the financial gods of the world” (176-77). Along with issues of globalisation, immigration and displacement there is the parallel theme of identity. Both Julie Summers and Ibrahim embark on a journey in search of their ‘self.’

The theme of contamination and illness runs throughout *Get a Life*. Gordimer also
offers information on ecological activism in South Africa. The novel’s main focus is on the impact of thyroid cancer and the enforced isolation from family on Paul Bannerman’s mind and body. The global discrepancy between the rich and the poor is another major concern. The threats to the environment discussed in the novel reflect the disturbing real life developments in South Africa. There is the explicit deliberation on the construction of a pebble-bed reactor “hugely adjunct to the existing dangers of Koeberg” (GAL 193). There are also references to “slower means of development taking the form of destruction” (84). Gordimer depicts the high rates of crime and corruption prevalent in the current living conditions in South Africa. She presents a country that figures “as both independent (with a colonial past) and subject to a global financial and cultural economy, one offering both hazard and opportunity” (Vital 91).

In all her novels, Gordimer’s ideology is embedded within the text. Be it her opinion against racial segregation or capitalist exploitation, her ideological stance is never directly stated, it filters through the vocabulary she employs. As a keen observer of human affairs, Gordimer has a “fine ear for speech rhythms and an eye for telling psychologically revealing gestures” (Boyers 190). Her style is detached and concise. With great wit and skill, she explores the intimacies in human relationships. A persistent facet of her style is the meticulous attention given to detail, that is “picking out, observing and indulging every gesture and movement” (Peck 150). This can be illustrated with a passage from A World of Strangers that describes John Hamilton’s hunting dog Gracie. As Toby narrates,

The dog wove in and out just ahead of John and me, but discreetly,
held by the invisible check of obedience. The discomfort of her body was forgotten, she did not seem aware of it at all, but followed the map of smells spread under pads like a crazy enchanting dream....We trudged without speaking, round the margin of the field; a barbed wire fence stood between the mealies and the beginning of the bush, on the left side, and we followed it for a hundred and fifty years and then stopped and waited....The dog panted with happiness, like an athlete who has just breasted the tape, and he put a hand down to quiet her. (233)

The power of Lying Days lies in Gordimer’s brilliant description of people, place and the lives. As seen in Helen’s observation of the natives:

I looked at these dark brown faces—the town natives were somehow lighter—dark as teak and dark as mahogany, shining with the arm grease of their own liveness lighting up their skin, wondering, receptive, unthinking, taking in with their eyes as earth takes water, close-eyed, sullen with defensive sullenness of the defenceless; noisy and merry with the glee of the innocent. (24)

And in the description of the comfort and peace that takes possession of Helen, at the Koch’s: “There was no pressure, no effort demanded of me; I stood at the window ... feeling the beat of the train in my blood, the cessation of the train’s noise in my ears. There was a withdrawal of sound like the tidal silence pulling away at the touch of a spiral shell to one’s ear; the sound of the sea” (50).

Even a negligible mode of conveyance is given much attention. As Gordimer
describes the ‘Pretoria Castle,’ the ship in which Helen has to sail: “the huge anchor hooked with vanity, like an ornament, on her side” (34). The grandeur of this ship is immediately contrasted with the smallness of ‘Ostia,’ the ship in which Joel was to sail: “A dumpy little thing, riddled with portholes and hung about with rickety-looking decks” (342).

Gordimer’s style is unsurpassed in descriptions of varied emotions. Joy, love, anger, pain, and all human sentiments are forcibly described. A picture of inconceivable pain is found in A World of Strangers in the panting and sobbing of the solitary black man who disturbs the Christmas of Toby and Cecil: “The frenzied travail sounded on, bestial and wretchedly human at the same time, a monstrous serenade from some medieval bell. It was all the cries we do not cry, all the howls we do not howl, all the bloody furies in our hearts that are never, must never be let loose” (201).

Frequent use of symbols, imagery and similes is another distinct feature of Gordimer’s artistry. At the centre of the narrative artifice of Burger’s Daughter, Gordimer presents the idyllic world of ‘The Lady and the Unicorn tapestry’ in the Cluny Museum in Paris, where the medieval masterpiece provides a symbol for Rosa’s growing self-perception.

Rosa Burger, the lady and the unicorn are “held in a brilliantly achieved narrative optic of reflectors, reflections and reflexivity” (Jacobs 29). As Gordimer describes, On an azure island of a thousand flowers, the Lady is holding a mirror in which the unicorn with his forelegs on the folded-back red velvet of her dress’s lining sees a tiny image of himself. But the oval
of the mirror cuts off the image just at the level at which the corn rises from his head; a horn white as his coat, plumed tail, mane and airly beard, a tall horn delicately turned. Two stresses of her golden hair are bound with a fillet of pearls up round her oval face (like the gilt frame round the mirror) and twisted together on top of her head imitating the modelling of his horn, which at the same time is itself an artifice, eh, bone fashioned to imitate a spiral. (BD 340-41)

Water imagery is used by Gordimer to suggest the fluidity of Helen’s growth from early adolescence to early adulthood. Water is associated with Helen’s experience of love and sex in her relationship with Ludi Koch. (Lomberg 6). At the Natal beach, they swim almost incessantly. Helen goes into the sea as if plunging into the new world of emotions that washes over her. Later on there are references to the sea and water. Helen speaks of herself as “one of those women … who drown in sleep” (LD 190). The manner in which she describes her first reaction to Paul Clark with whom she has a passionate love affair is also in terms of water: “it gave me a kind of simple sensual pride to understand out of experience the flow of the current. To wait till it should take me up again; till I should lay myself down Ophelia-like, and be carried by it” (LD 199).

There is a repeated use of similes involving animals in A World of Strangers. A man moving out onto the balcony is referred to as “looking out into the evening like a horse put out to grass after a day’s carting” (80) and the fondling of a girl by a young woman is likened to “the impersonal momentary instinctive recall to sex with which a dog will briefly lick once or twice another dog” (56). To Toby, Anna
Louw has “the neat head of a tiny bird” (70) and the Alexander’s pool is as lively as “the real enclosure at the zoo” (189). The culmination of the animal imagery is the hunt that takes place towards the end of the novel.

The animal imagery figures in The Pick Up too. In describing the position of the immigrants, Gordimer states that while the illegal immigrant is driven to live without an identity, the legal immigrant is “a stray dog, a rat finding its hole as a way to get in” (227).

Sheila Roberts in her article, “Sites of Paranoia and Taboo” observes that throughout the text of July’s People “animal imagery has inscribed Maureen’s inner and outer selves” (82). Towards the end of the novel as Maureen runs for the helicopter, “the feral kinesis” (82) of the animal imagery increases in power. Maureen first ‘walks’ then ‘stalks.’ She then jolts down the incline, leaps stones, breaks into another rhythm. She is running through the elephant grass, dodging the slaps of branches, stooping through thickets of thorn. She is running to the river, “balances and jumps from boulder to boulder” (JP 194). In her swift movement over the river and through the underbrush one sees the movement of a wild creature and not that of a suburbanite.

Gordimer uses similes to convey an attitude or a feeling or to suggest a nuance of meaning. Helen’s dabbling in books is likened to the interest displayed by “a child playing in the ripples at the water’s edge” (LD 89).

The warmth and intimacy of Helen and Paul is described thus: “they curled round each together like two cats in the narrow bed” (LD 251). When Rosa goes to Nice to stay with Colette, she travels in a car “like an effigy borne in procession” (BD
It suggests Rosa’s sense of perplexity and dumbfoundedness in the new atmosphere. Attempting to socialise, Rosa listens with curiosity and intentness to the gossip of Colette’s social circle “like a child listening to folklore” (BD 238). The state of the illegal immigrants who live without identity is likened to that of “a grease-monkey without a name” (PU 49). The lack of basic amenities and the preciousness of water in the desert is stressed by Ibrahim when he explains to Julie: “Water’s like gold is in her country” (PU 122). The relationship of Sonny and Hannah though it was clandestine, was like that of any other lover but in commonplaces they were “presented each to the together as strangers by a third person” (MSS 70). The link between ecology and modernity is seen in the description of the “birds who ring out like mobile phones” (GAL 49).

Gordimer makes a complex use of the fictional form. Commending her artistry, Robert F. Haugh states:

Her gifts are so diverse, her range so astonishingly broad, her gallery of places and people so various that one cannot speak of her world in a phrase….Her nimble imagination and capacity for response moves from the urban and suburban life of Johannesburg, with its political activism … to the meagre thatched roof and mud floor of native locations. (13)

The Smales drive through the bush for three days and nights and spend the night in a rondavel in July’s village which is a typical African village. Gordimer gives a graphic description of the interior of the one-room structure:

a stamped mud and dung floor … cobwebs stringy with dirt dangling
from the rough wattle steeple that supported the frayed grey thatch.
Stalks of tight poked through. A rim of shady light where the mud
walls did not meet the eaves; nests glued there, of a brighter-coloured
mud-wasps, or bats: A thick lip of light round the doorway. (JP 2)

In a similar vein, Gordimer gives a realistic description of the ‘modern’ day garage
in The Pick Up:

There’s the garage, as they said. As she walked in she saw its
ordinariness, a landing on normality: vehicles as helpless, harmless
victims upon hydraulic lifts, tools on benches, water dispenser, plastic
cups and take-away food boxes, radio chattering, a man lying on his
back half-under the belly of a car. (7)

Irony, being Gordimer’s favourite device there are apparent ironies in Get a Life.
Paul the ecologist works against exploitation of natural resources, it is ironic that
the treatment that saves him is radiation which is deadly to all conservation. Even
more ironical is the fact that while Paul fights to preserve the natural world, his
wife Bernice works for the corporate agencies that are bent upon destroying it.
Paul’s new status as an ‘untouchable’ forces him into a period of self-imposed
quarantine. His belongings are ‘segregated,’ his laundry, and cutlery are kept
separately, his meals are served on paper plates, and his visitors are forbidden to
touch him. Even his son Nikkie stands on the other side of an iron-barred garden
gate in order to talk to him. This physical isolation is an ironic mirroring of South
Africa’s segregated society of yesteryears.

In My Sons’s Story, it is ironical that it is only because the cinema is desegregated
that Sonny could go there with his mistress Hannah, as a consequence of which his adultery is exposed to his son Will. The novel concludes with a reference to the Benoni Municipal Library which Sonny never had the right to enter because of his race. Above the library entrance the motto “Carpe Diem” (12) ironically remained as an exhortation to action by those excluded from the library.

There is also the ironic reversal of roles between the male and female within the family. While father and son remain inside, mother and daughter move outside their home. Aila transcends the bonds of her role as a housewife. She moves from a domestic space to a political space having gained a new identity through her involvement in the underground revolutionary activities.

The very relationship of Julie Summers and Ibrahim is ironical. Physically they share the same place but emotionally they are worlds apart. The irony of their relationship is that Ibrahim wants that, which Julie rejects. On his departure to the U.S., Julie is depicted by Ibrahim as bereft of all that matters to her as he muses:

Let her have an idea of what she doesn’t realize … that she will be in this house, this family, this village, this place in the desert, without him, without the love-making she needs so much, without any one to talk for her … he held her off by his right as she asserted hers. (PU 266)

Different motifs are employed in Gordimer’s novels. The motif of prison is used in Burger’s Daughter, the motif of displacement occurs in July’s People and The Pick Up and the motif of illness figures in Get a Life. They play a significant role in
defining the very course of the events and the fabric of the text. Just as the devices of her narrative style are varied, so is Gordimer’s prose. It is economic, formal, realistic, descriptive, reflective and detached. To Robert Boyers, Gordimer is a writer,

whose very sentences arrest attention, not because they are pretty or rude or willfully eccentric, but because they move in several directions at once, often with great speed. One never loses oneself in the thickets of Gordimer’s prose, or forgets that she is writing about the fate of South Africa or the delusions of liberalism; but one feels oneself constantly maneuvered, snared, alternately pleasured, unsteadied, set back on one’s feet, briefly released by a prose that is everywhere an instrument of astonishing self-corrections and exactitudes. (190)

Echoing Boyers’ words, one finds a diffusiveness of meanings in Maureen’s final meeting with July. She feels a range of emotions from rage, shame to nakedness. Gordimer gives a compelling description of the scene in her lucid, fluid prose:

The incredible tenderness of the evening surrounded them as if mistaking them for lovers. She lurched over and posed herself, a grotesque, against the vehicle’s hood, her shrunken jeans poked at the knees, sweat-coarsened forehead touched by 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 a motor
Gordimer’s choice of titles for her novel is both apt and suggestive. Helen Shaw’s political and psychological maturation does make her give up the ‘lying days’ of her youth. It is in ‘a world of strangers’ both black and white that Toby Hood discovers himself. Rosa learns what it means to be ‘Burger’s daughter’ after straddling through various experiences. July’s People, the book’s title has an enigmatic possessive apostrophe. It may stand for July’s own people, his own race or his white masters. “The title poses,” as Michael Neill remarks, “certain questions about the nature of kind, kinship and allegiance, as well as about ownership, to which the novel repeatedly returns” (92).

Will, the son is the interpreter of his father, Sonny’s life in My Son’s Story. “Gordimer’s title,” as J. U. Jacobs points out, “implies that the child is truly father to the man, narratologically as well as ideologically” (30). Julie Summers’ journey towards self-realisation commences the day she ‘picks up’ Abdu from his garage. All the characters do ‘get a life’ after going through a phase of malady. Paul Bannerman moves from isolation to reflection to action as he escapes the jaws of death. The title, Get a Life is used in the novel, with Gordimer’s usual asperity:

Get a life, man! Let’s make and bring a high profile party of save-the-earthers to come as observers of what’s at stake—not the low voltage ones we’ve had—some pop stars who’ll prove they’re good world citizens ... it’s cool now for the famous to take up causes. (146)

Gordimer’s grammar is unconventional. She does not use quotation marks or speech tags. At times she sets off speech with dashes, as in the conversation
between Lyndsay and her son Paul Bannerman:

I’ve come to you –

But I can’t know how you feel – He’s my father, that’s not the husband, the man, your man –

Are you angry with him – As his mother’s son.

I suppose I am. Of course you are –

No, no, not angry. No right to be angry –

(GAL 133)

Often Gordimer does not separate the spoken parts from the rest of the narrative, as in the passage where Julie throws up the thought of Ibrahim’s mother expecting them to have children.

“Are you crazy?” And the moment spoken, he feels its cruelty stab back at him. He throws the razor onto the towel, holds his breath and plunges his face to the bowl of steaming water. When he lifts his head, she has taken up the razor and offers the bowl. As he dries his face it is as if the whole exchange has also evaporated. (PU 169)

There is nothing in the above passage to set off the word spoken and no explicit acknowledgement of Julie’s reaction.

Gordimer’s syntax and prose varies from novel to novel. Her economical prose that is marked by its pithy abrasive style mediates the Smales’ confusion: “Sheer unlikeness was the logic of their position” (JP 11). Maureen no longer knows “where she was in time, in the order of a day as she had always known it” (JP 17).

According to Anthony Winner, “the details of the unprecedentedness become the
terms of the realism” (122) in the novel.

Pithy statements that abound in philosophical truths are strewn in Gordimer’s novels. To list a few:

“to circumnavigate is to end up no farther than you started” (BD 192)

“There’s no free will in a capitalist economy. It’s the bosses’ will” (PU 21)

“It’s easier to go than to be left behind” (LD 361)

“Love/hate are the most common and universal of experiences. But no two are alike each is a fingerprint of life” (MSS 275)

“Disaster is private in its way, as love is” (GAL 42)

“A rebel against rebellion” (WOS 123)

“Us and them. Who is us, now and who them?” (JP 142)

Gordimer’s novels begin with paratextual epigraphs in the form of quotations from other writers like Claude Levi-Strauss, Federico Garcia Lorca, W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, Antonio Gramsci, Shakespeare and William Plomer. The epigraph for Burger’s Daughter is “I am the place in which something has occurred.” ‘The place’ here denotes both the country and Rosa’s own self. Likewise, the epigraph for The Pick Up:

Let us go to another country …

The rest is understood

Just say the word.

signifies the theme of search for identity. A line from Shakespeare’s sonnet XIII is the epigraph for My Son’s Story: “You, had a father, let your son say so.” In the
context of the sonnet, it is clear that a father’s story can be told only by his son.

Antonio Gramsci’s words: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms,” prefaces July’s People that focuses on a hypothetical revolutionary situation. W. B. Yeats’ lines in “The Coming of Wisdom with Time):

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Though leaves are many, the root is one,
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
Now I may wither into the truth
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that is used as an epigraph for The Lying Days, is an overt exposition of the theme of maturation. The awakening of Toby’s political consciousness is implied in the use of Garcia Lorca’s lines as the epigraph for A World of Strangers:

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I want the strong air of the most profound night to remove flowers and letters from the arch where you sleep, and a black boy to announce to the gold-minded whites the arrival of the reign of the ear of corn.
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For Get a Life, Gordimer uses W. H. Auden’s verse, “The Age of Anxiety”:

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O what authority gives
Existence its surprise?
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It foreshadows the physical catastrophe of Paul Bannerman that unsettles the entire family.

Just as the novels begin with thought provoking epigraphs, they end in an equally
impressive mode. The protagonists of The Lying Days and A World of Strangers leave South Africa with the assurance and resolution to come back. In Burger’s Daughter, Rosa returns to the very place she had fled. July’s People has an ambiguous ending. Maureen hears a helicopter land and not knowing whether it harbours friends or foes, she runs towards it. The elusiveness of the passage gives it an intriguing quality. To Ralph Pordzik, July’s People is remarkable for the manner “of creating an open-ended utopian horizon out of the desolation of the dystopian present” (183).

Maureen’s flight can be contrasted to Sonny’s return back to his familial fold in My Son’s Story. Likewise finding her ‘family,’ Julie Summers in The Pick Up, decides not to go with her husband, instead she makes the desert village her home. Get a Life ends with Paul Bannerman restored to health and familial happiness. The novels seem open-ended but they are marked by the protagonists’ definite choices and commitments that add to their lasting appeal.

Gordimer’s remarkable scholarship has been a contributing factor to the emergence of her highly personal and individualistic prose style. There is a series of inter-textual references to Sindbad, Charles Dickens, Somerset Maugham and E. M. Forster in A World of Strangers. Toby’s identification with Steven Sithole and with the vibrancy of Sophiatown is reflective of Forster’s Italians and the lure of the exotic. In The Lying Days, Helen’s and Joel’s personal collection of books include Auden, Eliot, Hemingway, Huxley, Pound, Yeats, Donne, Lawrence and Chekhov. They throw light on the influence of the literary figures on Gordimer. Sonny’s liking for Shakespeare, in My Son’s Story makes him name his son after
William. His reading of Kafka’s The Castle and The Trial had enlightened him to grasp the injustices of apartheid. In her flight from Johannesburg, Maureen could take but one book, Manzoni’s I Promessi-Sposi—The Betrothed. “It was translated from the Italian but would not translate from the page to the kind of comprehension she was able to provide now” ( JP 138). Gordimer incorporates an actual historical document in Burger’s Daughter. It is the banned pamphlet issued by the SOWETO Students Representative Council in June 1977. Such devices render a realistic tone to her novels.

In an interview with Stephen Gray, Gordimer stated:

In order to grasp a subject you need to use all the means at your disposal. The inner narrative, the outer, the reflection on an individual from other people, even the different possibilities of language, the syntax itself which take hold of different parts of reality. (265)

What Gordimer said about style in general is true of her own narrative style. Her vocabulary is simple and complex, formal and descriptive, both general and specific. Her syntax throws light on the character which in turn draws upon the milieu. Moving from the analytical prose of Helen Shaw (LD) to the confident political prose of Lionel Burger (BD) to the fractured confounded prose of Maureen Smales (JP) to the reflective prose of Paul Bannerman (GAL), her style is highly unique and varied.

Stephen Clingman argues that Gordimer’s novels provide a deep understanding of the history of South Africa, not just because of their context, but also especially
because of their form: “Gordimer’s novels are so valuable historically because they are so accomplished and developed as fiction. Thus, form will often be the key to consciousness, and it is where the novels are aesthetically richest that they are most useful for tracing out our history” (19).

Irrespective of the techniques Gordimer employs in her novels, there is organic unity within each of her novels—that is, the complete interdependence of all the parts of a work—be it the character, plot, theme or diction. Her works testify to the fact that “form and content are inseparable, that style is not a decorative embellishment upon subject matter, but the very medium in which the subject is turned into art” (Lodge 29).

Chapter – VII

SUMMATION

*The transformation of experience remains the writer’s basic essential gesture.*

--Nadine Gordimer

Colonialism was a lucrative commercial operation bringing riches to Western nations. In South Africa, the exploitation of resources and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of the colonised lands led to conflicts in its myriad forms. Writing cannot be free from social and political constraints. The social matrix of the writer does influence the subject, and Nadine Gordimer is no exception to this fact. Immensely shaped by the socio-political conditions of her