CHAPTER - V
Racism and Sexism: Micropolitics or Politics of the Body

In her fiction, Nadine Gordimer has pursued her political analysis primarily through her own brand of micro-politics or politics of the body, in which questions of sexual expression and transgression are closely linked to racial consciousness. This exploration of sexuality has made Gordimer's work of much interest to feminist commentators. Even cursory glances at her earliest novels reveal that she was aware of the body as an important element in the struggle against apartheid. For instance, her first novel, The Lying Days concerns the personal growth of Helen Shaw, the protagonist. The experience of the body has an obvious importance in this novel of personal growth, which includes the awakening sexuality of its protagonist; and the broader implications of the bodily experience – the connection with particular aspects of political expression and repression – are made quite explicit. At the concession stores Helen is profoundly affected by the sights and smells of a different social environment – a sudden exposure to an array of cultural difference – which she cannot immediately make sense of, and her reaction is registered bodily: she holds her ‘buttock stiffly together’, and feels that her eyes are not quick enough to take everything in; she feels a simultaneous need to suppress a giggle, or ‘long squeeze of excitement’ (LD, 20). The stiffened walk – a gesture of withdrawal – represents a protective response to what is frightening, yet still intriguing and desired: Helen cannot take in the experience as fully as she desires, and her further impulse is to repress a kind of hysteria that threatens to overtake her. At several points in the novel, Gordimer associates laughter with repression, fear or hysteria: the unmotivated laughter at the tennis club, for example, seems a kind of hysterical unease at the privilege the club represents (LD, 25). Helen’s physical attraction, and
the early responses to Ludi Koch are also marked by helpless laughter, before they have kissed for the first time (LD, 58). An important detail in this connection occurs early in the novel when we read of ‘an unwritten law’ that little girls must not be left alone because of the ‘native’ boys; this unarticulated fear of black sexuality is a collective fear which is instilled into the children of the white community before they can understand its implications. By this chain of associations the novel connects individual with broader social repression, and here one can see something positive in the novel’s concern with personal experience which some critics, like Stephen Clingman in *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, (41), have seen as representing a withdrawal from questions of political and historical commitment: this is not a fully fledged micropolitics, but Helen’s experiences do teach her that the individual body is the smallest identifiable site of both political repression and political growth.

In *A World of Strangers*, her second novel, the exploration of sexuality is perhaps slightly different than in her first novel. The novel, like *The Lying Days* charts the personal awakening and development of Toby Hood, but at the same time it also condemns his attitudes. In particular, his attitude to women, which remains essentially static, complicates his notional development: throughout the book Toby views women purely as objects of desire, and not as potentially equal partners. After a disturbing encounter with the blind racism of one of his office workers, Toby finds himself unwilling to share his feelings of anger and confusion with his lover, the superficial Cecil. Rather than finding an opportunity to articulate and develop an incipient moral outrage, he finds, in his lover, the offer of a distraction, and reflects: ‘I had, I suppose, an Eastern equation of women with pleasure; I fiercely resisted any impingement on this preserve’. (WS, 141). This reduction of woman to an object for personal gratification is, in Toby’s mind, a ‘preserve’ to be ‘fiercely’
protected, and this metaphor establishes a link between an individual male desire, and what one might call the institutionalized male desire of the state, which also employs a sanctioned violence, a ‘fierceness’ to establish ‘preserves’ for whites. This is the first occurrence in Gordimer’s novels of a connection, which is given extensive treatment in her fiction: the connection between egocentric male desire, and the illegitimate political appropriation and control of social space. At one point Toby insists on leaving the light on when making love with Cecil: ‘she argued about the light, but I wanted to see her face, to know what she was feeling. (Who knows what women feel, in their queer, gratuitous moment?’ (WS, 146). Here again, female sexuality represents the unknown ‘other’ for Toby, who asserts control over the available technology in a futile attempt to record in his memory the nature of this other. He also displays the classic male confusion about and fear of the female organism, which he desires to examine in the space he controls. Later on in the novel, at a club run by Indians, Toby witnesses the singing of a beautiful Indian girl, and sees her as a ‘creature’ made to please (WS, 182). Toby expresses a similar attitude towards the end of the novel, when dismissing the thoughts of marriage for himself: ‘for me, the exoticism of women still lay in beauty and self-absorbed feminity, I would choose an houri rather than a companion’ (WS, 249). The attitude expressed confirms Toby’s reactions to the Indian girl: in both cases there is an evident commodification and reduction of woman to an exotic other for personal use. This is precisely the way in which the forces of colonial imperialism view the potential of exotic ‘other’ places and populations. In short, the confused sexuality of the novel’s narrator produces an attitude, which parallels the world-view of the apartheid regime, a regime with its roots in an appropriating colonial past.
In *A Guest of Honour*, Gordimer explores further, the role of sexuality in the struggle against the apartheid regime. The ordering idea in the novel is that sexuality and political vitality go hand in hand. Bray’s affair with Rebecca accompanies the progression of his political understanding, just as the vitality of Shinza’s political ideology in opposition to Mweta is reflected in his marriage to a new young wife and the fathering of a baby. When Bray and Rebecca make love for the first time Bray is thinking of Shinza, and this clearly emphasizes the equation of sexuality and political vitality. Rebecca leaves, however, ‘before there was the necessity for some sort of show of tenderness’, and Bray realizes ‘that he had made love to her without seeing her face’. (GH, 143). These details can have been interpreted as being both positive and negative: it is unclear whether the lack of tenderness and the anonymity indicate an impersonality which is progressive, or whether the impersonality is in this case regressive, suggestive of the colonial appetite for conquering new territory. Elaine Fido in her *A Guest of Honour: A Feminine View of Masculinity* reads the scene as illustrating a connection between masculinity and power. (30-7). Infact this ambiguity is important and persists throughout the relationship. In a later scene Rebecca stands passively while Bray, finding her passivity ‘greatly exciting’ caresses her. (GH, 243). Here it seems that Bray’s excitement is aroused by the commodification of the woman, another suggestion of colonial thinking which seems still to taint Bray’s subconscious. But this, like the dubious arousal, is an interim stage as is made clear a couple of paragraphs later where we read of ‘a growing gap between his feelings and his actions’ which amounts to ‘a new state of being’. (GH, 244). This indicates a period of transition – to a new state – which involves a mismatch between feelings and actions in the interim. The ambiguity in Bray’s sexual responses indicate a process
of development which accompanies the gradual change in his political stance, the gradual progression away from conciliation to revolutionary commitment. This commitment is never explicitly articulated and, in the same way, the sexual relationship between Bray and Rebecca is never free of ambivalence.

The novel cultivates an ambivalence surrounding sexual activity which can be seen as both regressive and progressive, and in one of these ambivalent sex scenes the issue of language as power becomes the central focus. One morning, when her husband is visiting her, Rebecca slips over to Bray’s house to resume their affair, temporarily interrupted by the presence of the husband. The scene culminates in an act of fellatio in which Bray’s climax is presented as having symbolic significance: ‘In an intensity that had lain sealed in him all his life (dark underground lake whose eye he had never found) barrier after barrier was passed, each farthest shore of self was gained and left behind, words were reunited with the sweet mucous membrane from which they had been torn’. (GH, 279). Ostensibly, the sexual release appears to represent a symbolic healing which is also an articulation of identity for Bray, a discovery of personal power signified by the ‘reuniting’ of words with the sexual expression of the self. But if the episode is read from Rebecca’s point of view, a quite different interpretation irresistibly presents itself. The basic feminist notion of language as a phallocentric construct which silences women can clearly be said to be symbolized by this scene in which a literal phallus does the silencing.

There is an ambivalence in Gordimer’s treatment of sexuality in the above novels, but there is a drive towards an open sexuality emblematic of political freedom, a state which Irene Gorak in *Libertine Pastoral: Nadine Gordimer’s The Conservationist*, has called ‘libertine pastoral’, in which liberated sex unites radical
politics with private relationships, resulting in 'a vision of South Africa as a place of freely interpenetrating white and black bodies; this libertine ideal is seriously undermined by Mehring in The Conservationist because these are his values.(241-56). Gorak's complaint, though perhaps not sufficiently sensitive to the ambivalence of Gordimer's treatment of sexuality, does highlight a problem which is consciously present in The Conservationist: Mehring has a vision of sexual freedom which is very close to Gorak's characterization of libertine ideal, and he espouses it in a misogynistic monologue directed against his mistress:

> Yes, that's the deal, the hopeful reasoning of the impotence of your kind, of those who are powerless to establish their millennium. The only way to shut you up is to establish the other, the only millennium, of the body, invade you with the easy paradise that truly knows no distinction of colour, creed and what-not – she's still talking, somewhere, but for me her mouth is stopped. (Con., 154)

Mehring here envisages a code of free sexuality which is not merely apolitical, but which will represent a way of silencing unwanted political views: this is an envisaged assertion of power and dominance, political and sexual, which extends the concept of sexual fascism detected in Mehring by his mistress, Antonio, and which recalls Mehring's preoccupation with the 'soundless O' of the Portuguese girl he abuses.

Gordimer's sense of a liberated sexuality is to be vividly observed in A Sport of Nature. The career of Hillela Capran is in fact, determined by her sexuality: she either becomes attached to, or is the focus of desire for, a series of men in various situations, initially in South Africa, but subsequently abroad. A female bildungsroman, the novel follows the adventures and coming of age of Hillela, who
has been deserted at age four by her mother for a Portuguese lover. After being expelled from her Rhodesian boarding school for befriending a ‘coloured’ youth, Hillela is again abandoned, this time by her ineffectual father, to the care of her two upper-middle-class Jewish aunts (one a rich materialist, the other a liberal) in Johannesburg. When caught sleeping with her cousin Sasha, she is ousted from the sanctuary of her liberal aunt’s home, and she moves through a series of adventures, sexual and otherwise. She works at a number of odd jobs and explores various relationships — one of which leads her to flee with a phony white activist into independent Tanzania. When he, too, abandons her, she is ‘rescued’ by South African revolutionary organizer, Whaila Kgomani. After her perfect ‘rainbow’ marriage is shattered by his brutal assassination, Hillela learns the need for commitment to the liberation cause for which she now works untiringly. As a result of her work, she meets and almost marries a white American, Brad, whom she passes up finally for marriage to a black African general — soon to be successful president — of an unidentified independent African country.

Hillela poses special problems for conventional readers. She seems touched by little; she is easy and adaptable, with a sensuality and amorality that puzzles and even threatens many readers. This is because she is portrayed as a highly sensual and sexual being. The language of the body is her form of communication, as universally communicative as metaphor. It is through her sexuality that Hillela gains political awareness, most particularly through her inter-racial marriage to Whaila. The relationship raises the perennial theme of inter-racial sexuality in the novel, a theme that has permeated white South African writing since the earliest publications. Just as the enduring theme of attitudes toward the land in The Conservationist resonates ironically with Olive Schreiner’s Story of an African Farm, so Gordimer intends A
Sport of Nature to resonate ironically with the work of another South African writer, Sarah Gertrude Millin, who has written quite differently about inter-racial sex. Preaching racial purity in the early 1900s, Millin espoused, as Coetzee points out in White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa, that those who deny having “colour consciousness are, biologically speaking, sports”. She claimed that colour consciousness is a “profound feeling (call it instinct or call it acquired prejudice)” that can only be overcome by another biological force, such as sexual desire. (153). Gordimer ironically inverts the negative value Millin places on colour consciousness and makes it desirable. She portrays Hillela’s colour consciousness as one that delights in difference and that unites with her sensuality to brand her as a sport of nature. The old colonial attitudes are debunked in this ironic comparison, and Hillela is the only white person in the novel who is fully integrated into the African community.

For critics, however, the most controversial aspect of the novel remains Hillela’s open and uninhibited sexuality. Set outside the boundaries of South Africa, the inter-racial relationship between Hillela and Whaila doffers markedly from that of Gideon and Ann in Occasion for Loving; it is freed from the constraints of apartheid’s legal discourse on race and sexuality:

The laws that have determined the course of life for them are made of skin and hair, the relative thickness and thinness of lips and the relative height of the bridge of the nose . . . The laws made of skin and hair fill the statute books in Pretoria; their gaudy savagery paints the bodies of Afrikaner diplomats under three-piece American suits and Italian silk ties. The stinking fetish made of contrasting bits of skin and hair, the scalping of millions of
lives, dangles on the cross in place of Christ. Skin and hair. It has mattered more than anything else in the world. (SN, 177)

This suspension from apartheid’s interference grants the relationship a freedom that is reflected in the taboo-breaking description of the openness and sensuality between the couple:

[Hillela] never tires of looking at his hands. – Not wearing anything. They’re you. And they’re not black, they’re all the flesh colours. D’you know, in shops – and in books! – “flesh colour” is European’s colour! Not the colour of any other flesh. Nothing else! Look at your ‘nails, they’re pinkish – mauve because underneath them the skin’s pink. And (turning the palm) here the colour’s like the inside of one of those big shells they sell on Tamarisk. And this – the lovely, silky black skin I can slide up and down (his penis in her hand), when the tip comes out, it’s also sort of amber-pink. There’s always a lot of sniggering about the size of a black man’s thing, but no one’s ever said they weren’t entirely black. (SN, 178)

It is the first time in Gordimer’s fiction that an inter-racial relationship moves beyond the bounds of apartheid, both figuratively and literally. But by eroticizing Hillela’s sexuality, by impassioning her love-making with Whaila, and by expressing her unabashed curiosity and wonder over intimate racial differences, Gordimer has unleashed a flurry of agitation among critics and characters. Hillela is at once a “natural mistress”, “an innocent”; she is “manipulative” and “her field is men”. Since there has been no category, no discourse, in South Africa for this kind of loving inter-racial relationship, it remains deeply resisted. A Sport of Nature challenges the reader to recognize racial differences as positive and interesting, as we do differences in hair and eye colour, rather than to affect colour-blindness.
Reading difference individually and quite naturally as part of the fascinating diversity of our world resists the negative power of racist discourse and provides the reader with a tantalizing glimpse of a culture that celebrates difference.

But as Gordimer has shown in all her work, the politics of sex and power in South Africa are inextricably intertwined. Through apartheid, then, the body becomes enormously significant. She speaks, in an interview with Nancy Topping Bazin, compiled in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, of

> a particular connection between sexuality, sensuality and politics inside South Africa. Because, after all, what is apartheid about? It's about the body. It's about black skin and it's about woolly hair instead of straight long blond hair . . . The whole legal structure is based on the physical, so the body becomes supremely important. (304).

Sex, therefore, becomes the intersection, a disputed territory, of the public and the private. Gordimer’s use of sexuality both as a concept and as a device in her work is clear in her earlier fiction. She has retained the right, as Dorothy Driver put it in her essay *The Politicization of Women*, “for women . . . to be sexually attractive and vital beings, without being therefore classified as ‘merely’ feminine”. (186) When Gordimer explains that “having the revolutionary temperament, the daring, usually goes along with very sexually attractive personalities, strong sexuality in both men and women”, (CNG, 278), she seems to be saying that sexual and revolutionary energy rise from the same site. She refers to her own induction into the world via sexuality, calling it her “Rapunzel’s hair”. (CNG, 153) Hillela is Gordimer’s most striking fictional equivalent here, a figure Gordimer admitted would probably “annoy some feminist circles very much”. (CNG, 293). Yet despite views on sexuality that may make feminists bristle, Gordimer demonstrates that in South
Africa the life of the body makes sex a political act, which frees her use of sex in fiction, both literally and metaphorically, for political ends. Read metaphorically, then, *A Sport of Nature* becomes Gordimer's imaging of a new kind of culture based on the holistic politics that include the politics of the body; it is the artists attempt to make whole the disintegrated consciousness of apartheid, to create a new integrated African consciousness. As Reuel, Hillela's second husband, says: "It's all part of my African-made - work, love-making, religion, politics, economics. We've taken all the things the world keeps in compartments, boxes, and brought them together. A new combination, that's us. That's why the world doesn't understand". (SN, 266).

If *A Sport of Nature* embodies Gordimer's view of the politics of the body, *My Son's Story* represents a substantial shift as it wrestles with issues of gender in the building of a new nation. It represents a shift from Gordimer's earlier view that only after the race struggle is won may the feminist battle be fought. It endorses instead the view of women like Mamphela Ramphele, the principal of the University of Cape Town who, (as she says in her presentation at the Women's Caucus Breakfast in the African Studies Conference held in Atlanta in 1989), have long held a socialist feminist view that "key oppressions of sex, race and class are interrelated and the struggles against them must be coordinated". (6). Critics like Dorothy Driver and Karen Lazar hold that strong and consistent feminist concerns are embedded in all of Gordimer's work. In *My Son's Story* these concerns are central, making it Gordimer's first unequivocal feminist novel.

Gordimer's history on the issue of feminism is instructive. She has consistently denied that her work is feminist. In a number of interviews she has expressed impatience with the feminist movement, an attitude which might seem
strange in a writer whose fictions are particularly sensitive to the problems of women’s oppression. The following interview with Robert Boyers, published in the 1984 issue of Salmagundi, is a representative comment:

_The white man and the white woman have much more in common than the white woman and the black woman, despite their difference in sex. Similarly, the black man and the black woman have much more in common than the black man and the white man. . . . The basis of colour cuts right through the sisterhood and brotherhood of sex. It boils down to the old issue of prejudice and the suppression of blacks of both sexes . . . the loyalty to your sex is secondary to the loyalty to your race. That’s why Women’s Liberation is, I think, a farce in South Africa._ (19-20)

A feminist novel, she holds, is one “conceived with the idea of proving something about women”. (CNG, 297). She says she is a writer who happens to be a woman, not a “woman writer”, that is, “somebody who is setting out to make a point about being a woman”. (CNG, 278). She has in the past called feminist issues “piffling” and has asserted that feminism has no role to play in South African politics. (CNG, 203).

Gordimer is clear here that racism is the primary issue and sexism a secondary one. This represents an important difference from some feminist formulations which reverse this priority, and see racism, and other oppressive social structures as products of sexism, of pervasive patriarchal thinking. For the specific situation in South Africa, Gordimer has argued for the reverse casual relationship: that specific instances of sexist behaviour amongst blacks are directly produced by racist organization. In the interview to Robert Boyers just cited, Gordimer explains that black women feel their exploitation by black men is ‘a consequence of the
exploitation by whites’. As an illustration, she describes the familiar situation of a black man from one of the homelands having to move to find work, without being given permission to bring his wife and children with him. The frequent result of such an enforced separation is that the man finds another woman and has children by her. In such a situation the wife left in the country will often find herself abandoned. The example indicates how instances of acute exploitation of black women are invited if not completely caused by, white economic exploitation.

Yet this does not negate the argument that sexism begets racism. It may be that racist structures initially conceived by sexist thinking, reproduce, in turn, sexist actions: the abandoned black wife and mother inhabits the inner site in a Chinese-box system of hierarchical oppression, a model which highlights the problems of a simple casual explanation for social repression. Indeed critics have identified ambiguities and contradictions in her work which challenge her stance on feminism. Sheila Roberts, in *Nadine Gordimer’s Family of Women*, states that in her fiction Gordimer has “by-passed the decades of the feminist movement’s greatest literary activity, and has since the fifties established female protagonists whose lives must be taken seriously”. (103). Pertinent here are Karen Lazar’s remarks, in *Feminism as “Piffling”? Ambiguities in Some of Nadine Gordimer’s Short Stories*, on how a socialist feminism would differ from Gordimer and her hierarchical analysis of the relative importance of racism and feminism:

*A socialist feminism would . . . depart from Gordimer on two counts. Firstly, it would argue that sexual oppression is by and large comparable in gravity and extent to other forms of oppression, and, where possible, must be fought concurrently with other struggles. Secondly, socialist feminism would, to use Althusser’s terms, stress the ‘relative autonomy’ of sexual oppression,*
arguing that. Although it is partially constituted in form and mediated by other types of oppression, it has a distinct and 'material' existence that cannot be explained away as a mere facet or ancillary of other forms of oppression. This distinct and material existence calls for distinct modes of analysis and opposition.

Gordimer has not, to my knowledge, expressed any coherent recognition of these aspects of feminist thought. (103)

The invocation of Althusserian 'relative autonomy' is helpful in that it leads us away from simplistic linear casual models of oppression, and also from the hierarchical differentiation between racism and sexism that Gordimer has herself made. Lazer's appeal for specific and equivalent modes of attention to different forms of oppression also has a resonance in connection with Gordimer: it may be that she has offered no 'coherent recognition' of this kind of political analysis in her essays or in interview, but in her fiction her various analyses of oppression do amount to a tacit acceptance of the specificity of various forms of racism and sexism. Beyond this, she has also considered, through her fiction, the various positions that are suggested in the debate about her relationship to feminism. In some of her short stories, for example, she has presented white women and black men as fellow victims of white male oppression. Dorothy Driver notes how, in some of the stories, Gordimer has presented as comparable the oppressed position of women and blacks, though Driver also notes how, at other points in the fiction, such an idea is treated ironically, and, at others, subverted. (Driver, 29-54).

Gordimer, then, examines the complexities of racism and sexism by taking up various positions in her fiction to consider these issues. One of her most important and consistent stances stems from the differentiation she makes baldly in
her non-fictional comments. Robin Visel, in *A Half-Colonization: The Politicization of Women*, sums up how economic privilege separates white from black women in the later novels: ‘While the native woman is truly doubly-oppressed or doubly-colonized, by male dominance as well as by white economic and social dominance, the white settler woman can best be described as half-colonized. Although she too is oppressed by white men and patriarchal structures, she shares in the power and guilt of the colonists’. (39) The argument here is that white patriarchal society supplies a niche for the white woman, based on the requirement of her sexuality, which is subservient, but nevertheless an integral part of the colonizing structure: thus the white woman is enticed away from a feeling of affinity of oppression with black men and women. But this position is more than a mid-ground of semi-corruption, as Visel makes clear in another essay on Gordimer’s colonial heroines, *Othering the Self: Nadine Gordimer’s Colonial Heroines*:

> The white woman is not allowed to claim innocence; nevertheless, she is increasingly prevented by the social and political conditions of apartheid from acting upon her responsibility. Furthermore, she is increasingly cut off from blackness, both by government decree and the rising hostility of her black brothers and sisters . . . the ambiguous, self-divided figure of the white girl or woman is the site of the hesitant, fraught rapprochement of white and black. She is the site of connection, while she is made to realize the impossibility of connection. (33-42).

Indeed, Gordimer’s female characters are both internal battlegrounds in which the conflicts of South African society are played out, and meeting places where illicit relationships between the races develop. Gordimer, the most rooted of writers, who maintained in an interview to *The New York Times*, that, “To go into exile is to
loose your place in the world”, is ‘exiled’ from the black majority in her country who are her ‘virtual public’. Her fiction is acutely aware of its alienation. Her imagination stretches to delineate as fully as possible the arenas of conflict where white faces black: from the ironies of the master-servant bond to clandestine sex, underground politics, dreams and fantasy.

Thus the image of the black body buried in the white-ruled land in The Conservationist – and in the white unconscious – is so powerful a pattern in Gordimer’s work. For the white heroine, whose psyche is the site of this tumult and ferment, the metaphor of the buried black body is both self and other. In Gayatri Spivak’s formulation the white subject cannot ‘self’ the other; she can neither see the colonized other as a free subject nor successfully identify with him or her. The black other can neither be assimilated nor granted full personhood by the white subject. This is true for the relatively developed, realistic character of Marisa Kgosana in Burger’s Daughter as well as for the dead man who is more symbol than character in The Conservationist, in which novel Gordimer compares colonial and male domination through the figure of a sexually and economically powerful white male, Mehring, in whose increasingly deranged mind Black, Woman, Death and Land form a threatened and finally threatening link.

In Gordimer’s fiction, the black other cannot be ‘selfed’ by the white subject any more than the female other can be ‘selfed’ by the male subject. However, the white self can be ‘othered’, blackness found, finally, within. In The Lying Days, Helen Shaw tries to ‘self’ her black other Mary Seswayo, but is blocked by a wall of difference and indifference. The theme of the white heroine’s fearful foray into black territory is taken further in each of Gordimer’s subsequent novels. At the end of Occasion for Loving, Jessie Stilwell, who has learned to see herself as an other,
starts to become one by removing herself from the protection of white society. A similar change of heart, or othering of self, takes place in *The Late Bourgeois World*. In *The Conservationist* the buried body rises amid imagery of resurrection and revolution: “But violence has flowered after seven years’ drought, violence as fecundity, weathering as humus, rising as sap”. (Cons. 243). In *July’s People*, Gordimer tests her white heroine in the aftermath of the revolution. The novel’s ambiguous ending, “she runs”, is more artistically truthful than the ending of *The Lying Days* which it echoes: “I’m not running away”, Helen claims insincerely, en route to Europe. At the end of *July’s People* Maureen Smales is described as a cornered animal panicked by her new found freedom from the white-defined role as mistress of a comfortable suburban household. When she is forced to redefine her relationship with her former servant July, now her family’s protector, she is offered the opportunity to transform herself into a fellow African. But she cannot. Maureen and Helen, the good middle-class South African daughters and wives, who observe the liberal decencies in their relationships with their black inferiors, clearly are dead-end heroines for Gordimer.

In Hillela she introduces an altogether new type: the “sport of nature”, who is not subject to the social ties, the rules of behaviour, or finally, the failure of imagination, which bind and limit Maureen and Helen. It is Hillela’s strangeness, her otherness in white South Africa, which enables her to manipulate the transition to the Future, which even for Rosa Burger is unattainable. Hillela as other: a natural rebel and nonconformist, fearlessly embraces blackness. For her alone among Gordimer’s heroines, blackness is not alien, but rather her native element. But Hillela’s, like the buried body in *The Conservationist*, is a mythic rather than realistic character; she is a symptom of her creator’s desperate hope rather than a
believable personality. She is evidence of Gordimer’s frustration with the political stalemate for whites in South Africa. While not an autobiographical character, Hillela’s, like Gordimer’s other heroines, is a vehicle for personal statement. Through Rosa she affirms her own commitment to remaining in South Africa as witness and activist. Through Maureen she rejects the good liberal daughter in herself, this message being reinforced by the parallels between Maureen and the more nakedly autobiographical Helen. Through Hillela’s she signals her dissociation from what she sees as the dead values of the past, imaginatively reinventing a new personality to fit a new country.

Gordimer’s idealization of Hillela’s stems from her own apparent need to free her central character from the white colonial dilemmas that trapped her previous heroines between two worlds: alienated from white society and unable to participate fully in black society. Helen, Jessie, Rosa and Maureen progressively leave the ambiguous shelter of the white community for an ambiguous identification with black liberation. As fellow victims of white male authority, as questioning, intellectual women, as seekers of authentic experience, their empathetic claims to “blackness” do not convince. Rosa chooses to come home to prison because only within that enchanted circle can she overcome her whiteness, her alienation, her otherness. Outside, apartheid laws, distrust, resentment, fear and confusion separate her from her black comrades. Inside, she and Marisa are sisters; “Bassie” is again her brother. But going to jail is a paradoxical form of liberation, as the novel’s refrain makes us aware. In A Sport of Nature, Gordimer unconvincingly allows Hillela’s a short cut to blackness. Relying on instinct, attraction, pluck and luck, she bypasses history and politics to emerge triumphant in her African robes and headdress at the birth of the new nation.
This, through a natural transition, brings us back to *My Son's Story*, which, as pointed out earlier, examines issues of gender in the building of a new nation. The novel is set in the early 1980s, when petty apartheid laws are being dismantled and South Africa faces international sanction designed to strangle the economy and force political change in the country. The novel tells the tale of a respectable Coloured schoolmaster who is drawn out of his comfortable though poor bourgeois family existence through his principled identification with the increasing militancy of his students. Sonny, the schoolmaster, turns out to be a surprisingly good speaker, and he is recruited into, and then rises through, the ranks of the banned ANC until he loses his government teaching job and is detained in jail for two years. His refined and lovely wife Aila, his bright son Will, and his lively, pert daughter Baby have been protected from political implication through Sonny's faithful adherence to the rules of silence in the movement. In prison sonny is visited by Hannah, a fleshy, blonde activist for an international human rights agency, who becomes his focus, first for friendship, and later, upon release, for a joyous but increasingly obsessive love affair. The affair is unwittingly discovered by Will one day when he stumbles upon his father and Hannah at a theatre, and he becomes an unwilling accomplice in order to protect his mother. The affair continues, a destructive force at the center of the family as they all eventually intuit what is going on. Baby parties, takes drugs, attempts suicide, and leaves home; Will feels anguished and trapped. Only Aila seems to maintain her quiet, good, homebody wifely composure. Alienated from Sonny, Aila becomes a confidante for her daughter, who eventually announces her clandestine involvement in the struggle, which requires her exile in Zambia with her activist boyfriend, soon to be her husband. Aila's consequent trips to Zambia to visit Baby, who soon has a child, leads to her own unexpected involvement in the
movement, an involvement revealed only late in the novel, much to the astonishment of Sonny and Will as well as to the reader, through her arrest. Sonny's status within the movement has by this time declined, and Hannah is moving on to a job promotion in another country. After a display of confidence and competence worthy of any comrade during her political trial, Aila leaves Sonny and Will confused and alone when she skips bail to live in exile. She is permanently lost to them both.

Given Gordimer's definition of a feminist novel as one that "sets out to make a point about being a woman", *My Son's Story* must be considered feminist. Gordimer sets the novel at a time when the legal system of apartheid is crumbling and some integration is taking place: the movie theatres are integrated and Sonny is moved by the ANC — as a form of protest and not without incident — into a white working class suburb. Though she chooses — in her de-emphasis on race — not a black or white family, but a "Coloured" family (she has said, in an interview to Terry Gross National Public Radio in 1992, that for the Coloureds stand "in some subconscious way" for all South Africans), Gordimer has not yet relinquished the issue of race. Apartheid's poison still lingers, most distressingly in the psyche of young Will. He says, thinking of his father's white lover, "The wet dreams I have, a schoolboy who's never slept with a woman, are blonde. It's an infection brought to us by the law that have decided what we are, and what they are — the blonde ones." (MSS, 14).

Despite lingering racism, the novel is a story about gender relations within the domestic structure — but it has far-reaching implications for the nation as a whole. The central authority in the novel is slowly usurped by Aila. Her presence, quiet and unfathomable, comes to dominate the novel. Gordimer has said in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, that in the clandestine atmosphere of South
Africa, “you just never know, really, to whom you’re talking” (257) and it turns out that even Sonny and Will knew to whom they were talking when addressing their own wife and mother, respectively. The novel, then, uncovers the limiting and sexist assumptions that restrict both son and husband from understanding Aila (and Baby, for that matter, who must go into exile and have a baby of her own to claim her womanhood), and the story becomes the tale of Aila’s (and Baby’s) liberation from their oppression.

The sexism permeating the novel is evidenced in both men’s inability to “see” Aila for who she is and for who she becomes, and to know her strengths and possibilities. Their vision is clouded by their pre-conceived notions of women and by their admiration for her beauty and her feminine refinement. She is valued (and blamed) for her nurturing care, her domestic skills, her quiet supportive manner; she is also viewed as inept and in need of protection in her dealing with the outside world. When Sonny learns of her planned trip to see Baby in Zambia, he recalls, perplexed, that she “never had much relish for journeys, she didn’t know how to deal with officialdom; she had found it difficult even to speak in the presence of the warder”. (MSS, 149). Will, on the other hand, assumes Aila cannot handle the truth about Sonny’s affair. He fears that his guilt of complicity manifests itself in his behaviour and will alert Aila to the problem from which he feels he must protect her:

If I kept out of her way she would know something was wrong, thinking in her innocence this would be something concerning me. And if I try to be with her, to cover up that he wasn’t – that might set her thinking, and I didn’t want her to think, I didn’t want my mother to think about him in any other but her gentle, trusting way. (MSS, 59)
Just how blind Sonny and Will have been in their perceptions of Aila as woman, wife, and mother is measured by their shock when they learn of her involvement in the struggle, an involvement more dangerous and daring than Sonny's— one with weapons rather than words. When Will discovers— much earlier than Sonny does— Aila's other life through her passport photos, his response is telling: "Where is she going? Is she going to leave him? Wild idea... my mother! ...So I know nothing about her". (MSS, 146). And when Sonny finally discovers her activism, he admits:

Yes, there was a blank in his chronology of her life; he knew little of the changes in her for which, he believed, he was responsible... He knew he was having difficulty in accepting Aila as comrade. He had consciously to rid himself of an outworn perception of Aila. Consciously that was the problem. (MSS, 257)

Will sees more than his father does. He at least understands how little he knows about her, and he knows, after her symbolic haircut (she crops her long, luxurious feminine hair into a short, boyish style) that she is free of conventional family ties. "She never came back", he says. "Cut loose. She was gone for good: my mother". (MSS, 168). He also acknowledges: "I realize I don't know enough about women"(MSS, 176), a realization Sonny never quite reaches. Nevertheless, Will remains trapped in patronizing and sexist behaviour, an indication that changing deeply and emotionally ingrained behaviour means changing patterns of power relations as well. Before Aila is arrested, Will picks up a woman at the beach for sexual experience, which he describes in terms of male power and dominance: "I went down to Durban on the motorbike and picked up a girl on the beach the first day. It was easy. Some of the beaches are open to all of us now. So I've lived with a
woman for six days, fucked her and slept in the same bed with her, and don’t even
want to see her again”. (MSS, 136). He also dismissively refers to his girlfriend as
“a nice enough little thing”. (MSS, 184).

While the men in this novel start out as the authorities, the speakers in the
novel, their position of centrality does not continue. Narrator/author Will’s story is
dislodged, thrown off course by Aila’s story; the men’s story is overtaken by the
stories of women who refuse to be trapped by the sexist male narrative. Sonny is
displaced by Aila as the real revolutionary, the committed activist. He experiences
the thrill of male power when Hannah and Aila are present at the same function: “He
became eloquent, his nostrils round with conviction, he had never expressed himself
more forcefully than while, the first time, instead of keeping the two women
fastidiously apart within him, he possessed both at once”. (MSS, 93). But Sonny’s
position is undermined by the imbalance his need for Hannah creates in his political
life; the private need usurps the political. Through an incident when the police open
fire at a political funeral ceremony that he and Hannah attend, Sonny realizes that
his need for Hannah has eroded his political will. Fleeing with the others from the
gravesides, he sees a man fall, hit I the head by a bullet. Instinctively he turns to aid
his comrade, but checks himself and runs on to protect Hannah. Later he questions
whether saving Hannah is in accord with his value of living for more than oneself.
He admits:

To run or to stop: a choice between them. Who was to say which was the
most valuable? But this woman whose hand was curled against his neck,
wasn’t she oneself, his need?

Saved himself.
Now he had something he would never speak, not to anyone, certainly not to her. (MSS, 126-27)

Hannah, on the other hand maintains political balance. She loves Sonny dearly, but remains someone “for whom the people in the battle are her only family, her life, the happiness she understands”. (MSS, 67). After Aila had skipped bail and Hannah has taken a new assignment (both leave Sonny to take up further political work), sonny considers the ironic repercussions that the repeal of the Immorality and Mixed marriages Act (which outlawed interracial sex and marriage) has meant for him:

He found himself thinking – insanely – that if the law had still forbidden him Hannah, if that Nazi law for the “purity” of the white race that disgustingly conceived it had still been in force, he would never have risked himself . . . .

Because needing Hannah, taking the risk of going to prison for that white woman would have put at risk his only freedom, the only freedom of his kind, the freedom to go to prison again and again, if need be, for the struggle . . . .

That filthy law would have saved him.

Out of the shot and danger of desire. (MSS, 263-64).

While Sonny wrestles with his tangled secret private life, Aila slips in and takes center-stage. Sonny is needed no longer. Watching her prepare for her trial, he tries to reconnect with her, to understand, but he has a “sense of stretching his fingertips at something that was disappearing from his grasp”. (MSS, 239). Baby, too, finds her place in the world. Learning from her mother’s experience, she involves herself in the struggle early. She finds a centre, and only then, in a relationship of equality, (unlike her brother’s relationship), she marries a fellow revolutionary.

The novel, then, becomes one about women who find their voices through the course of political action. Aila and Baby move from passive domestic roles to
active political ones, while the men, Sonny and Will – hampered by assumptions of
their power and centrality, their sexual competitiveness, and their egos – are
marginalized. Both are left impotent. Will has a story he “can never publish” (MSS,
277) and Sonny – with shrinking gums, enlarged prostrate (MSS, 264), and his
“bundle of sex” hanging like something “disowned by his body” (MSS, 169) – is
shut away in detention again. Early in the novel when Baby attempts suicide, the
paternistic pattern of traditional sexual identities that bond father and daughter and
align mother and son is identified by Will. He realizes that Baby knows about
Sonny’s affair with Hannah:

Had she, all this time, been taking his part against my mother? As I tried to
shield my mother against him? Female against female. Male against male.
So what could we have done for her? To stop her cutting her wrists when she
couldn’t manage. (MSS, 62).

As the novel unfolds, however, this pattern shifts to another in which gender bonds
mother and daughter. Their solidarity aids in their liberation from the limited
gender-role expectations of Sonny and Will.

But Gordimer is not unrelenting in her critique of Sonny or Will. The
intrigue of politics and power contorts and divides, its secrecy and deception alienate
and manipulate, and its perpetrators are also its victims. Sonny pays for his
dishonesty, his blindness, in his relationship with Aila by losing touch with her. He
cannot know her anymore. His alienation from Aila is attributable to his patronizing
stereotyping of her. Developed in a traditional community where “in his kind of
family women cooked and cleaned” (MSS, 163), Sonny and Aila’s marriage
discourse had embraced bourgeois values. His attraction to and communication with
Hannah, however, results from political circumstances. Sonny’s involvement in the
struggle teaches him a new revolutionary discourse, one he feels restricted from passing on to his family because of the ANC codes of silence. Aila consequently is shut out, denied access to the language that remakes Sonny. It is this alienation, set against the energy, commitment, and excitement of his new life in the struggle that makes Sonny vulnerable to the affair with Hannah. His failure lies, however, not so much in his vulnerability to Hannah as in his underestimation of Aila’s ability to change, to learn, to join him. His perceptions of traditional gender roles and of Aila’s assumed acceptance of them trap him, and strand her, for the novel makes abundantly clear Aila’s inner strength and intelligence and her capacity for change. But Sonny remains captivated by Hannah. It is the thrill of Hannah’s mind, the thrill of communication that draws Sonny to her in the flesh. It is a relationship founded on precisely the opposite of adolescent Will’s racial reading of the affair. They share a discourse based on ideology, politics, literature – not race. But while they revel in the passion this generates, Aila, too, is learning a new discourse, a feminist discourse of self-reliance, self-esteem, and self-assertion. While Sonny has deluded himself into believing that “at least he had been able to provide Baby with a room of her own for the process of becoming a woman” (MSS, 57), it is, ironically, Aila who is building a Woolfian room of her own. When Sonny tries to revive the old domestic discourse with Aila, he is stunned to find that she no longer speaks that language. She has changed and is thus lost to him.

My Son’s Story calls the conventional family structure into question, and it invokes the view that patriarchal family patterns repress our liberating instincts. To succeed, a revolution must extend not only to the economic and political spheres but also to the repressive morality of everyday life as well. Newman, in her book Nadine Gordimer, quotes Philip Rieff’s comment that
habits of domestic living are concrete ways in which ideology internalizes authority. Unless a revolution conquers the bedroom it cannot conquer; without a rearrangement of intimacy, men will continue to identify themselves, if not with old rulers, then with old rules of conduct. (41)

The family is seen as the factory in which the state’s structure and ideology are moulded. However radical the revolution, so long as the conventional family persists, authority creeps back, and the revolution fails. Alienated from Sonny by his affair with Hannah, Aila learns to rearrange her intimate world, but Sonny still clings to the old rules of conduct. His reliance, first on Aila’s respect for his authority as patriarch, then on Hannah’s reinforcement of his political growth and worth, makes him blind to the meaning of Aila’s change. But after her arrest, when she exhibits no need for him since all is taken care of by herself and the movement, it slowly dawns on Sonny: “Perhaps he flattered himself Aila had needed to suffer his love of another woman to change. Perhaps it had nothing to do with that, with him. Perhaps she had freed himself just as he had, through the political struggle”. (MSS, 258) It is when the Sonnys of the world have been stripped of their illusions of importance that hope for a new and equitable nation becomes a possibility. And it is when the young Wills of the world mature beyond their superficial objectification of women that hope for the future lies. At the end of the novel, Will makes two claims. One is “But I’m young and it’s my time that’s come, with women. My time that’s coming with politics”(MSS, 276). The other is:

I am excluded from [politics] ... but I’m going to be the one to record, someday, what he and my mother/Aila and Baby and the others did, what it really was like to live a life determined by the struggle to be free, as desert dwellers’ days are determined by the struggle against thirst and those
dwellers amid snow and ice by the struggle against the numbering of cold.

(MSS, 276).

Will’s time with women (rather than sex objects) still lies in the future, though certainly by the end of the novel both time and women have done much to educate him. Aila is no longer “mother” to Will. Rather, he calls her Aila, a woman in her own right without the familial claim. Will’s experience with women – mother, sister, and girlfriend – is part of his political education. Such education must be part of the new nation building if the revolution is to create an equitable society.

Sexuality, in Gordimer’s novels, is expressive of a conviction about the possibility of an authentic cultural identity based on inter-racial communication and understanding. Just as the interaction of self and other is presented as the basis of cultural identity, so do the personal interactions in the novels reveal broader political lessons. This must be seen as the foundation of a radical personal micropolitics. Foucault’s work has been taken as the source of a micropolitics in some branches of critical theory, and the signs are that this will continue to be an expanding and productive area for the theorizing of social change. Gordimer’s own micropolitics has a great deal in common with this development in critical theory, and this correspondence has two principal significances. First, it represents a primary example of Gordimer’s fictional formulation of ideas that parallel contemporary intellectual developments. Second, it indicates that a focus on the activities and experiences of individuals does not necessarily involve a restrictive cultivation of individualism. Such a focus can most definitely form the basis of a thorough-going political novel.

A summary of the general significances of Foucault’s thought, as attempted by Jana Sawicki in Discipling Foucault, locates the accepted divergences between
his analyses of power and those commonly associated with theories of social change. These divergences also form the bases of the micropolitics implicit in Gordimer’s work. An important point of divergence is Foucault’s challenge to the idea that power is something which is possessed; instead of this idea Foucault formulates a model of power as exercised: the focus of the model, rather than on the subjects related through power, is on the power relations themselves. This denial of the pre-existing nature of subjects related through power leads directly to a second key point of divergence, the conviction that power is productive rather than repressive. Foucault shows how subjects are produced through certain institutional and cultural practices: his focus here has been on the practices of disciplinary power which are created with the development of the human sciences in the nineteenth century. For Foucault, disciplinary practices establish binary divisions – healthy/ill, sane/mad, legal/criminal – which accrue authority and can be used as a means of social control. Such divisions have a pervasive effect in society, conditioning the way individuals label themselves and each other according to established norms. These controls also involve the actual physical segregation of the population through (for example) incarceration. (21-22). There is an evident connection here, with the ideological practices of apartheid. The actual incarceration of blacks under directly repressive measures is suggested, and, beyond this, so too is apartheid ideology, which demands a consciousness in individuals of their racial separateness. Of course, this is an ideology promulgated by the discourses of political dogma rather than those associated with the human sciences, but the effect is that of a disciplinary practice designed to produce ‘normalized’ subjects fearful of transgressing a particular binary division, especially through inter-racial sexual contact.
The productive nature of power has profound implications for how it can be resisted, and here we meet with the most positive aspect identified by some commentators of Foucault: the idea here is that rather than attempting to identify centralized sources of power, there are localized instances of it which individuals can address themselves to. This is not to deny that such a thing as state power exists, but rather to insist that effective resistance can be mobilized by locating the pervasive power relations which obtain in the lives of individuals, at the microlevels of society. This conception of power and the appropriate arenas for its resistance inevitably involves questions of sexuality and sexual behaviour. The individual body becomes the smallest unit or focus of productive power and, simultaneously, the smallest identifiable site from which resistance can emerge.

For Foucault, however, the definition of individual sexuality is a primary route of disciplinary power. The problem here is not that sexual expression has been denied but rather that it is channeled and normalized in particular ways, circumscribing not only sexual behaviour but also the terms in which it can be discussed. This means that expression of sexuality is not per se evidence of progressive political activity; but it does indicate that the transgression of particular sexual taboos can represent a challenge to restrictive ordering practices. This has certainly been a primary feature in Gordimer’s novels in which the racist apartheid ideology is often shown to be effectively challenged – at the level of micropolitics – by trans-racial sexual liaisons. Gordimer also seems to perceive the necessity – as does Foucault – of resisting the existing discourses of sexuality. Hillela’s in A Sport of Nature is a practical demonstration of this conviction, since her sexuality leads her into some predicaments that appear to present her as the victim of patriarchal control.
Trans-racial liaisons are not always salutary in Gordimer’s novels, however, and this has much to do with the insistence on difference they usually uphold. For some commentators such an insistence is counter-productive since it courts the danger of replicating and upholding racist divisions. Despite this danger, Gordimer usually insists on focusing on racial difference in her presentation of progressive trans-racial relations. On one level this insistence represents solidarity with the political promotion of black South African identity. It can also be seen as a strategic inversion of apartheid ideology – the racial division is not challenged, but the evaluation of it is; this, perhaps, is an appropriate response to the disenfranchisement of a demographically dominant racial group. It is also a promotion of difference which suggests a further parallel with Foucault. This is especially so when we bear in mind the ambivalent presentations of inter-racial contact in Gordimer’s work: Foucault’s presentation of difference is marked, also, by an ambivalent attitude to the liberatory potential of difference, a recognition that difference can supply a source of resistance and potential change, but that it can result in social fragmentation. The promotion or celebration of racial difference does not, apparently. Square fully with Gordimer’s prescription for advancement through cultural cross-fertilization; but there is also a general salutary principle in Foucault’s prescriptions for preserving difference, the sites of marginalized voices from which effective resistance can emerge, and this does locate one positive element in Gordimer’s presentation of difference.
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