CHAPTER - VII
Conclusion.

The analysis of Nadine Gordimer's works during the apartheid era reveals certain distinct features. Her literary output admits of historical and political significance. In fact Gordimer herself had acknowledged that in her writing she acts upon her society, while, in this relationship of mutual influence, history acts upon her. Indeed through their acute and sustained observation of the society she inhabits, her novels give us an extraordinary and unique insight into historical experience in the period in which she has been writing. Closely aligned to the sense of history is her own sense of her identity in the political climate of South Africa during the period of apartheid. My analysis has attempted to show how, while describing change in South Africa, Gordimer appears to be relating an inner history that relates to her and to the substance and form of her vision, the transformation of her consciousness as of her sense of moral and political obligations. Close observation is, in this sense, a precondition of Gordimer's historical consciousness. However on its own, a close scrutiny on its own would not give us a 'consciousness' of history in the sense that history gains meaning from fiction. A further feature of Gordimer's writing therefore becomes significant: that the perspective she employs is social and historical in nature. The key to this perspective is that social and political lives are seen as integrally related. What this implies is that her writing persistently approaches the domain in which social and historical forces gain significance for private existence, and here an historical consciousness itself begins to develop, as the novels develop their sense of what history implies for individuals, and for a broader society at large. Nadine Gordimer pursues this analysis of history and politics, I have noted, 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. Micropolitics, in helping to identify and empower 'sites' of marginalized voices, is closely allied to questions of geography or 'space' as a way of explaining key questions of power and social organization. I have noted how Gordimer's fiction displays an ongoing and developing understanding of the importance of space.

This sense of a continuous development of perspective is, in fact, central to the development and refinement of the central themes of her novel sequence as a whole. Thus while in the first three novels Gordimer conducts a critical examination of European literary forms, a phase later ensues in which the politics of textuality assumes central significance: the novels up to The Conservationist express a conviction about the importance of discursive practices as sites of power, and here the concern with micropolitics and geopolitics is closely allied with the construction of narrative form. This becomes more explicit in Burger's Daughter where Gordimer fashions a novelistic form, which reinforces her implications about the ideological function of discourse. There is, then, an increasing literary self-consciousness in Gordimer's work which reaches a peak in the self-reflexive ness of My Son's Story, and A Sport of Nature.

This characterization of Gordimer's career—in which the logic of the early novels produces an increasingly explicit literariness in the later ones—is an account, which suggests affinities between Gordimer's work and important postmodernist trends. Certain affinities are immediately apparent, but the extent to which Gordimer can be seen as a postmodernist writer is more problematic than it might at first appear. Postmodernism, for instance, according to Linda Hutcheon, (The Politics of Postmodernity), is often taken to be concerned with problematizing ideas about the
centred self, a concern which strikes a cord with the novels of Gordimer. (40). From her first semi-autobiographical novel, Gordimer has been concerned with de-centring the self, and re-siting individual identity in a reciprocal and interactive relationship with larger social structures. However, this in itself cannot be sufficient to consider Gordimer a postmodernist writer. Moreover this is an aspect which is treated ambivalently in Gordimer’s works: single, major protagonists dominate her novels indicate a formal centring of self which one does not find in postmodernist writing, even if notions of unified selfhood are continuously questioned. Further affinities are suggested in Linda Hutcheon’s presentation of postmodernism as a mode, which combines realistic reference and modernist self-reflexiveness, and makes simultaneous use and abuse of these features, in both photography and narrative. (141). Gordimer has shown an ambivalent interest in photography: she has collaborated with photographer David Goldblatt to produce two works combining her text with Goldbatt’s black and white photography. In Life-times: Under Apartheid, for example, powerful images of black dispossession are interspersed with extracts from the novels which describe similar scenes. This book does not display the kind of problematizing of representation that one associates with postmodernist photography. The collaborative work has its own polemical intention, and is constructed to suggest a straightforward illustrative function for the extracts from the novel. The novels, of course, do not function in this way, and often contain critical references to photography. For instance, Liz Van Den Sandt’s hankering for a family photo-album in The Late Bourgeois World belongs to the bourgeois world she must grow beyond; in July’s People, there is even an ironic reference to the kind of work that Gordimer and Goldbatt have produced when we learn that photographs of township life had often been displayed for the aesthetic enjoyment of
shoppers in malls designed by Bam Smales (JP, 125). As with the question of the centred self, a glance at Gordimer’s interest in photography suggests only a partial manifestation of postmodernist tendencies.

Gordimer, then, it would appear, as Dominic Head points out, seems to occupy a ‘border’ position, moving towards a mode of postmodernist expression, but having been influenced by the realists and the modernists at various stages of her career. (Head, 184). The distinction between modernism and postmodernism as stated by Brian McHale in Postmodernist Fiction helps to articulate her ‘border’ position in relation to these movements. Important here is McHale’s formulation of a changing dominant – from the epistemological dominant of modernistic poetics to the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction. It makes sense of the postmodernist anxiety over states of being: the modernist concern over ways of knowing, expressed in fragmented and uncertain narrative forms is, effectively, intensified into an anxiety about the nature of our existence. Ontologically, in McHale’s account of postmodernism, may involve the description of different universes, including the fictional universe, or ‘heterocosms’ of fiction. (27).

However, Gordimer’s fiction distinguishes itself from this ontological questioning of the plurality of worlds by its continual reference to a specific ‘world’. Yet these specific references may if presented in a certain way, embody postmodernist ontological concerns. Her comments, for instance, on Burger’s Daughter, indicate a certain alignment with these concerns. She indicates that the book’s focus is the nature of commitment, but not ‘commitment’ defined in narrow political sense: the concept is part of a broader ‘ontological problem’. (Jannika Hurwitt, The Art of Fiction, 100). Gordimer’s fiction refers continually to actual people, places, and ideas which might be said to anchor the text in the specific historical and ideological
struggle. For McHale, references to actual people/ places/ideas mean that these are incorporated rather than reflected in fiction: they comprise areas of ontological difference within a fictional heterocosm that is otherwise homogeneous. (McHale, 28) In postmodernist fiction an overtly disruptive principle highlights this ontological difference, the mingling of different worlds, whereas Gordimer’s novels generally appear to try to efface this difference, and reinforce, through such references, their connection with the ‘real’. However, the overlap between the fictional world and the real raises the question of ontological difference, even if such a difference is not usually signaled in Gordimer. There is an order in Gordimer’s world-projections, which contrasts with the ‘anarchism’ McHale detects, in the postmodernist tendency to sustain a plurality of possible ontological levels. Such an anarchic presentation of plural worlds is absent in Gordimer’s fiction, but something of this postmodern anxiety filters into her fiction on occasions. The ambiguity with which July’s People ends is, in part, a conflict of ontological possibilities, with Maureen Smales giving herself up to a contradictory moment in which an unresolved choice between different political orders resonates.

One of the most powerful criticisms of postmodernist fiction stems from the ontological anarchism that Gordimer eschews. There is an apparently uncritical openness to the conditions of postmodernity in postmodernist fiction, which, for McHale, involves a paradoxical return to mimesis: the form of postmodernist fiction imitates the splintered ontological experience of life in developed industrial cultures. McHale employs Foucault’s concept of heterotopia to account for the arena of this pluralism, the fictional space in which worlds that are mutually exclusive can be accommodated. He goes on to define the fictional heterotopia in terms of a key difference from realist and modernist modes: in realism and modernism, the spatial
construct is organized around a perceiving subject — either character or narrator; the
space of postmodernist writing is differently ordered or disordered — deconstructed
at the same time as it is constructed. (McHale, 38-45). According to this distinction
Gordimer would appear to have a greater affinity for modernist modes. Her novels,
like most modernist novels, problematize the nature of perception, especially that of
a selected individual. But this is normally a learning process, governed by an
epistemological dominant, often buttressed by a disembodied narrator who provides
ontological stability: there is a certitude about the world which Gordimer’s
protagonists must learn to know better. As the novel sequence progresses, however,
the voice of the disembodied narrator is heard less often, and the yardstick of
ontological stability is less accessible. This may involve an increasing reliance on
the kind of unity, which even the most heterotopian fiction can rely on: the
paradoxical creation of a homotopia, which, in this context, is used to designate the
space projected and concretized by readers in the reading process. In the
postmodernist texts analyzed by McHale the possibility of this homotopia is
interrupted by the deliberate incorporation of elements drawn from other ontological
levels, such as the device of *retour de personages* — in which the same characters
crop up in different novels by the same writer and has the effect of reinforcing
realism by appearing to give characters an existence beyond the text in which they
first appear. (McHale, 56-58). There is an instance of this in Gordimer: the fleeting
reappearance of Rosa Burger in *A Sport of Nature*, and this has quite the opposite
effect as it is combined with Gordimer’s usual reference to actual people: the
customary connection between world and text is exaggerated by the self-parodying
reference which deliberately confuses fiction and history. The cultivation of such
confusion may conform to an important postmodernist tendency identified by
McHale, discussing a revisionist creation of historical reference in postmodernist fiction where, as fiction and history exchange places, the straightforward location of the 'real world' is made problematic. (McHale, 96). This question, which lies beneath the surface of the earlier novels, becomes explicit in A Sport of Nature and, to some extent, in My Son's Story. However, despite the self-consciousness of its structure, other elements of the narrative signals a particular seriousness; the full realization of the principle of representativeness which Gordimer had been working up to in the previous novels.

The most convincing aspect of McHale's case for the positive potential of postmodernist fiction concerns its treatment of discourse, based on Bakhtinian principles. McHale follows Bakhtin's insight concerning the novel as a medium primarily concerned with the dialogue between different discourses, and allies this to the concept of heterotopia: there is a non-hierarchical mingling of both spaces and different discursive orders in the postmodernist novel, and this produces a polyphony since there is no privileging of any one discourse. For McHale, this is a way of foregrounding the ontological aspects of different discourses in conflict, thus creating 'a polyphony of worlds'. In the modernist novel, however the plurality of voices – the heteroglossia – is suppressed by the unifying effect of a monological perspective, integrating the various worlds of discourse within one ontological plane. (McHale, 163-67). This seems to be a useful initial technical distinction between modernist and postmodernist texts, and which also helps to locate the ambivalence of Gordimer's techniques: it seems clear that there is a unifying perspective in Gordimer's novels, though one which diminishes in importance through the sequence, implying a transition from modernist to postmodernist according to McHale's distinction. One way of indicating this transition is through
the self-consciousness of some of Gordimer’s narrators. Some postmodernist narrators deliberately destroy the illusory frame of their narrative, drawing attention to its artificiality and constructedness. In this connection one might compare the ending of Gordimer’s first novel, *The Lying Days*, with that of her later novel, *My Son’s Story*. In both the narrator breaks the frame by announcing her-or-himself as the ‘author’. In *The Lying Days* the gesture signals a crucial stage in Helen Shaw’s development, advancement in her understanding of her place in a crystallizing social world. This suggests an ‘epistemological dominant’ which is harder to detect in *My Son’s Story* where Will announces himself as the ‘author’ of the novel realized before us, which he also claims he can never publish. This contradiction suggests an ontological discrepancy in McHale’s terms: the fictional world in which Will can create is separated from the evocation of the real society in which he would be silenced. This is not, however, an anarchic representation of plural worlds, but a use of a particular ontological contradiction: that between a Utopian realm of free expression – effectively created by the space of the novel – and the given of South African reality. *A Sport of Nature* is clearly the novel, which most explicitly betrays Gordimer’s growing affinity with the attributes of postmodernist fiction. One significant area of commonality between the novel and postmodernist fiction is the element of carnival. Carnivalized literature involves a picaresque adventure in which the protagonist seeks answers to essential questions, through episodes that see him or her violating social norms and experimenting with extreme mental and physical states. These features of carnivalized literature accurately locate key stages in Hillela’s career, and this is significant if such features are also characteristic of postmodernist fiction. Parodies of official ceremonies and rituals, of course, are essential features of popular carnival, and if *A Sport of Nature* is taken as a
carnival then we see such a parody included in the easy transition to South African independence celebrated in the ceremony at the end of the novel. The most significant connection at this point, however, may be with the revolutionary impulse for if *A Sport of Nature* can be seen to incorporate a genuine revolutionary moment, it is in the ludic postmodernist sense, where the celebratory moment is double-edged, involving self-parody as an integral part of the Utopian theme.

Yet if Gordimer's writing shows an increasing connection with the technical properties of a composite definition of postmodernist fiction, different constructions of postmodernism suggest her work is less easy to place. Her roots in realism and modernism, and her appropriation of techniques drawn from realist and modernist writers, are postmodernist credentials. She might also, at times, be formulating a 'double-coded' fictional form – combining modernist with earlier codes – in the kind of combination, which is characteristically postmodernist. However, McHale's 'ontological dominant' might be something that gradually assumes importance, most notably in *A Sport of Nature*, and this gradualism might locate her as a borderline figure. There is, however, a preoccupation with micropolitics from Gordimer's earlier works, and this indicates a challenge to grand theories of macropolitics; the same challenge is encoded in the gathering significance of her metafictional interrogations of representation and power. Ultimately, it may be the South African situation, which lends the appearance of a borderline position to Gordimer's fiction: there is certitude in her radical criticisms of her nation, which are forced to resemble analyses of a universal given. Yet, as Gordimer knows, the twentieth century's most infamous and sustained situation of oppression is mutable: it was only the racist conception of apartheid, which was founded on a misplaced notion of the ontological fixity of a racially divided world.
Works cited

