

**Women in History: Female Identities and Legacies of  
Colonialism in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories**

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Pro Gradu Thesis  
April 2007  
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Tampereen yliopisto

Kieli- ja käännöstieteiden laitos, englantilainen filologia

KARONEN, SATU: Women in History: Female Identities and Legacies of Colonialism in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories

Pro Gradu -tutkielma, 69 s. + lähdeluettelo

Huhtikuu 2007

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Tutkielmassani käsittelen Nadine Gordimerin eteläiseen Afrikkaan sijoittuvia novelleja jälkikoloniaalisen ja feministisen teorian näkökulmasta. Keskityn analyysissäni novellien naishahmoihin ja siihen, miten heidät on esitetty subjekteina ja toimijoina.

Nadine Gordimerin ura valkoisena etelä-afrikkalaisena kirjailijana on kulkenut ajallisesti ja teemallisesti yhteydessä Etelä-Afrikan menneinä vuosikymmeninä harjoittaman rotusortopolitiikan eli apartheidin kanssa. Gordimer on romaaneissaan, novelleissaan ja esseissään käsitellyt poliittisten ja sosiaalisten realiteettien vaikutusta yksilön elämään. Vaikka Gordimer on kieltänyt olevansa poliittinen kirjailija, on hänen tuotantonsa perustana ollut rotusorron aiheuttaman kärsimyksen paljastaminen. Gordimer on korostanut sitoutumistaan afrikkalaisuuteen identiteettinä, sen sijaan että identiteetti perustuisi valkoiseen ihonväriin.

Tutkielmani teoreettinen näkökulma perustuu jälkikoloniaalisen kirjallisuusteorian ajatukseen siitä, että kolonialismin projekti on läsnä myös niissä teksteissä, joissa kolonialismista ei varsinaisesti puhuta. Kolonisoitu subjekti esitetään kolonisoijan vastakohtana, ”toisena”, johon kolonisoija heijastaa omia halujaan ja pelkojaan. Itse jälkikoloniaalin asemasta kirjoittavat feministiteoreetikot ovat kritisoineet ”kolmannen maailman” naisten esittämistä yhtenäisenä, historian ulkopuolisena ja alistettuna ryhmänä. Subjektin ja toimijuuden käsitteiden avulla voidaan purkaa tämän ryhmän esittämistä osiin. Rodun, luokan ja sukupuolen kategoriat vaikuttavat subjektin rakentumiseen. Subjektin mahdollisuus toimijuuteen määrittää sen, pystyykö subjekti toimimaan maailmassa vai onko hän vain tuon maailman olosuhteiden alainen, pystymättä itse vaikuttamaan elämäänsä.

Tutkielmassani keskityn kymmenen eri aikoina kirjoitetun novellin luentaan. Novelleista ensimmäinen on kirjoitettu 1950-luvulla ja viimeinen 2000-luvulla. Kunkin ajan sosiaaliset ja poliittiset huolenaiheet ovat selkeästi näkyvillä näissä teksteissä ja ne vaikuttavat siihen, miten tarinoiden henkilöt kokevat itsensä ja toimivat elämässään. Novellien naishahmot edustavat monenlaisia sosiaalisia ja etnisiä lähtökohtia, aina keskiluokkaisista valkoisista naisista kaikkein köyhimpiin ja alistetuimpiin mustiin naisiin. Osa novellien valkoisista naishahmoista kokee syyllisyyden ja häpeän tunteita tajutessaan oman etuoikeutetun asemansa epäoikeudenmukaisuuden, toiset perustavat identiteettinsä juuri valkoisen ihonvärin tuomaan ylemmyyteen. Novellien valkoiset naiset joko jäävät toimettomina oman häpeänsä vangeiksi tai toimivat aktiivisesti sovittaakseen kolonialismin jättämän perinnön vääryyksiä. Novellien mustat naiset esitetään osana kodin ja perheen piiriä. Heidän yrityksensä rakentaa identiteettiä ja toimijuutta heille määritetyn ahtaan aseman ulkopuolella epäonnistuvat. Mustien naisten ristiriitainen rooli vapaustaistelun symboleina, mutta ilman omaa poliittista ääntä tai toimijuutta tulee selkeästi esille. Novelleissa toistuvat väkivallan, seksuaalisuuden, tiedon ja tietämättömyyden, vallan ja alistamisen teemat. Gordimerin näkemys ihmisyydestä ja muutoksen mahdollisuudesta vaikuttaa näiden novellien kautta tarkasteltuna melko negatiiviselta.

*Avainsanat:* Etelä-Afrikka, apartheid, kolonialismi, novelli, identiteetti, toimijuus.

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## **1. Introduction**

In this thesis I will examine the female characters in the short stories of the South African writer Nadine Gordimer. I will concentrate on the close reading of ten different short stories, written over the period of fifty years, and analyse how the female characters in these stories negotiate their subject positions in relation to their status as gendered and raced beings. The stories are firmly set "in history" in the sense that the socio-political concerns of the age of their production are clearly visible in the texts.

### **1.1 Nadine Gordimer and the role of the writer in 20th century South Africa**

Nadine Gordimer (1923- ) is one of the best known and most acclaimed white African writers. Her literary career has been a continuous commitment to depicting the realities of life in South Africa. Because of the centrality of the surroundings to Gordimer's writing, it is necessary to begin with a brief sketch of South African history.

Southern Africa was first colonized by Dutch settlers in the 17th century. The British established their own colonies in South Africa in the 19th century. Despite the conflicts between different settler groups, such as the Anglo-Boer wars in 1880 and 1900, South Africa became a republic governed by the English and Afrikaans speaking white minorities. The Dutch-based Afrikaners continued to uphold a cultural unity separate from the other settlers and especially from the native peoples of the land. Part of the ideological construction of "Afrikanerdom" was a perception of Afrikaners as a "chosen people" who had the moral right or even the obligation to rule over the black people of

southern Africa. This served as a justification for racism.<sup>1</sup> The black population, which consists of several different linguistic and ethnic groups, formed almost 80 per cent of the population in the mid 20th century and this percentage has even grown since.<sup>2</sup> In 1948, following the victory at the election of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party, the word 'apartheid' (Afrikaans for 'apartness') came to define South African life.<sup>3</sup> Various laws were implemented to classify people according to their ethnic status (as white, coloured or black) and to restrict the access of non-whites into the public domain. The apartheid laws stretched all the way to the most private sphere of all: interracial marital and sexual contacts were prohibited. The black population was forced to live in designated "homelands" in impoverished rural areas and they had to carry passes as proof of their identity to be able to move about inside the country. Resistance to the apartheid rule was organised under the African National Congress, which operated underground during the years of the imprisonment of many of its leading figures, including Nelson Mandela. The colonialist apartheid rule officially came to an end with Mandela's release from prison in 1990 and South Africa's first free election in 1994. Despite the immense changes in the country's governance and every-day life, today's South Africa still has to deal with many of the legacies of apartheid, for example the issue that land is still largely owned by the white minority.

Nadine Gordimer's writing seems to have been destined to mirror the history of her country. Her first collection of short stories was published in 1949; a year after apartheid became the official policy of South Africa. The early years of Gordimer's career as a

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<sup>1</sup> JanMohamed, Abdul R. *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1983. pp. 83-85.

<sup>2</sup> Beinart William and Dubow Saul. *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*. London: Routledge, 1995. p.2.

<sup>3</sup> The roots of racial segregation do go further back in history and the causes of it can be analysed in both material and ideological terms. For an in-depth discussion on the history of apartheid, see Beinart and Dubow above.

writer were influenced by her contacts in the multiracial cultural and literary scene of the 1950s Johannesburg. After the repressive measures of the apartheid government drove most black Southern African writers into exile, Gordimer continued to show solidarity towards her colleagues and even published a study, *The Black Interpreters* (1973), on black Southern African writing.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the position of the white writer in South African society was furthermore problematised by censorship. Three of Gordimer's novels were banned for varying periods of time in the 1960s and the 1970s. Her 1958 novel *A World of Strangers*, which depicts a white man torn between allegiance to his black friend and his white lover, was banned for twelve years.<sup>5</sup> Despite the hardships, Gordimer decided to stay and write in South Africa instead of going into exile. In her 1959 essay "Where Do Whites Fit In?", reprinted in a collection of essays titled *The Essential Gesture* (1988), she already discusses the possible roles of white people in a future majority-ruled Africa. Here Gordimer states the primacy of belonging to a place over being part of a 'race' when she writes that "if one will always have to feel white first, and African second, it would be better not to stay in Africa." (p. 37) In this essay Gordimer also reflects on her own ambiguous position as a white writer in Africa:

I myself fluctuate between the desire to be gone - to find a society for myself where my white skin will have no bearing on my place in the community - and a terrible, obstinate and fearful desire to stay. I feel the one desire with my head and the other with my guts. (*Essential Gesture*, p.35)

Although Gordimer remained true to her desire to stay, it has been argued that the conflicting desires between staying and leaving, commitment and escape, are reflected in Gordimer's fictional characters throughout her career.

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<sup>4</sup> Marsh-Lockett, Carol, P. "Nadine Gordimer" in Pushpa et al. Eds *Post-colonial African Writers*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998. p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> Pettersson, Rose. *Nadine Gordimer's One Story of a State Apart*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Anglistica Upsaliensa, 1995. p. 15.

Among other prominent South African writers who have depicted the harsh realities of life under apartheid are Alan Paton, whose novels *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) and *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953) were the initial literary works to expose South Africa's situation to the outside world. J.M. Coetzee has been writing novels as well as literary criticism since the 1970s and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. André Brink can be considered the most notable Afrikaans language writer, although he translates his work into English before it is published. Of the black South African women writers the name of Bessie Head is perhaps the best known. Her 1972 novel *Maru* deals with the tribal hierarchies in a black community from the perspective of a young woman.

Nadine Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. The honouring of the life's work of a writer whose subject matter had been the personal traumas caused by a divided society drew further international attention on South Africa at the time of great turmoil. When apartheid finally collapsed, writers in South Africa were faced with a situation where it seemed the main motivation behind their writing was gone. Questions were asked on the future and the relevance of white writing in South Africa. Nadine Gordimer has answered to this criticism by emphasising how writers will continue writing because their task is and always will be the same: to discover the truth about a society and its people. The end of apartheid was not the end for writers but rather a beginning, a liberation.<sup>6</sup> Nadine Gordimer has indeed continued writing: she has published both non-fiction as well as fiction from the 1990s onwards. Her latest novel, *Get A Life*, was published in 2005.

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<sup>6</sup> "Rätten at Njuta en Roman: Intervju med Författarinnan Nadine Gordimer". Interview of Nadine Gordimer in Nilsson, ed. *Litteratur i Södra Afrika*. Stockholm: Afrikagrupperna, 1996. p. 36.

## 1.2. Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories

Nadine Gordimer started her career as a writer with her first collection of short stories, *Face to Face*, in 1949. Since then, she has published her stories in over ten different collections, the most recent of them, *Loot*, in 2003. Despite her successes as a short story writer, Gordimer has been acknowledged first and foremost as a novelist.

Gordimer's novels have been the subject of abundant critical attention, her short stories to a lesser extent. The short story as a form seems to be less inviting to "serious" criticism than the novel. Nadine Gordimer herself has noted on the critical neglect towards the short story in her essay "The Flash of Fireflies": "[...] literary critics regard it as merely a minor art form. Most of them, if pressed, would express the view that it is a highly specialized and skilful form [...] But they would have to be pressed; otherwise they wouldn't bother to discuss it at all."<sup>7</sup>

The reasons behind this lack of prestige are briefly discussed in Michael Chapman's in-depth study of South African literature:

In making a case for the short story as the resilient tradition, I am aware that in South Africa the directing hand of white literary life has granted more importance to the novel. As in Western education, the novel is seen to fashion forms of international allegiance in the latest style, and to probe the problem of words and reality as epistemological enquiry into what, in the case of many South African writers, it still means to be a white African on a black continent.<sup>8</sup>

However, Chapman acknowledges that in the specific South African context, the short story is a more appropriate form because of its accessibility and its popularity in the wider (i.e. other than white, educated, middle-class) reading public. In fact, most of

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<sup>7</sup> Gordimer, Nadine. "the Flash of Fireflies"(1968) in May, Charles, ed. *The New Short Story Theories*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994. p. 263.

<sup>8</sup> Chapman, Michael. *South African Literatures*. Harlow: Longman, 1996. p. 385.

Gordimer's short stories have been initially published in magazines outside South Africa. Nadine Gordimer, whose novels can be seen to fit in the tradition of European realism, is well aware of the disparity between a "bourgeois" mode of writing and the setting in which she is writing. Gordimer does not, however, consider the choice of literary mode to be a political act, but an aesthetic necessity:

A novel is [...] staked out, and must be taken possession of stage by stage; it is impossible to contain, all at once, the proliferation of concepts it ultimately may use. For this reason I cannot understand how people can suppose one makes a conscious choice, *after* knowing what one wants to write about, between writing a novel or a short story. A short story occurs, in the imaginative sense. To write one is to express from a situation in the exterior or interior world the life-giving drop--sweat, tear, semen, saliva--that will spread an intensity on the page; burn a hole in it.<sup>9</sup>

In Gordimer's case it may also be the fact that she has acknowledged some of her short stories to be "sketches" of themes that she has later on developed further in her novels<sup>10</sup> that has led to the lack of critical interest in the short stories as such. Parallels to Gordimer's novels can also be made with the short stories discussed in the present work and this aspect will not be ignored, though it is not the main focus of my study.

Nevertheless, Gordimer's short stories are appreciated for their artistic merit:

The best of Nadine Gordimer's stories have a unity and relevance [...] a concentration and a coherence of experience as recorded, as selected and as significant, that is hardly possible in the novel [...] some of Gordimer's stories do approximate to the condition of poetry in their intricate relating of event, meaning and symbol.<sup>11</sup>

There are, however, some critics who have concentrated on studying the thematics in Gordimer's shorter fiction. For example, Karen Lazar has discussed the representation of women in Gordimer's stories as reflecting the writer's attitudes to feminism. A feminist

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<sup>9</sup> Gordimer, Nadine. Introduction to her *Selected Stories*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1975. p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> See Gordimer's interview in: Kenyon, Olga. *Women Writers Talk*. Oxford: Lennard, 1989. p. 102

<sup>11</sup> Magarey, Kevin. "Cutting the Jewel: Facets of Art in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories" (1974) in Smith, ed. *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*. McGill University: Critical Essays in World Literature, 1990. p. 47.

approach to Gordimer is challenging because her stance on feminism has been somewhat rejecting. Gordimer has insisted that the issues of gender are secondary to the issues of race in the South African context. In the 1970s she criticised feminism for being a white middle-class phenomenon with no relevance to black women's lives and questioned the validity of the struggle for improving women's rights in a country where the majority of the population did not even have the right to vote.<sup>12</sup> Karen Lazar nevertheless argues that Gordimer's stance on feminism is not explicitly negative and that in the 1980s and the 1990s she became more sympathetic towards politically committed feminists who saw women's rights as part of the larger issue of human rights.<sup>13</sup>

### 1.3 The Aims of the Thesis

This thesis takes as its subject of analysis the female characters in ten of Nadine Gordimer's short stories. I want to acknowledge the length of Gordimer's career as a short story writer by including stories written from the 1950s to the 2000s in my analysis. This will also enable me to detect possible continuities or changes in the thematics in Gordimer's writing.

I will analyse the ways in which the female characters negotiate their subject positions as gendered and raced beings. By using theoretical tools from post-colonial and feminist criticism, I will attempt to carry out an analysis of the dynamics between race and gender that is sensitive to the ideological and political setting of the stories.

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<sup>12</sup> Interviews with Gordimer discussed in: Lazar, Karen. "Feminism as 'Piffing'? Ambiguities in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories." In King, ed. *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*. London: Macmillan, 1993. Pp. 213-216.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 215

I will also analyse the portrayal of agency in these stories, that is to say to which extent the characters in these stories are able to act in their own lives and their surroundings. Furthermore, I will look into the dynamics between men and women, both white and black. Sexuality, politics, power, knowledge and ignorance are some of the key elements in these stories. The emotions generated by these elements are mostly negative ones: shame, guilt, helplessness but also self-knowledge and empowerment. What I eventually want to find out is whether it is possible to trace any "vision" of humanity in these stories, whether there is hope of progress, of a possibility of the individual to transcend some of the barriers that divide human beings.

Although my emphasis will be on the close reading of no more than ten stories chosen from a body of over ten collections of short stories, I hope, by placing them in the wider context of Nadine Gordimer's writing and the environment of their production, to find a new angle for looking at the subject of Gordimer's writing; "the human being in history", as she herself has put it. I chose these particular short stories because of the centrality of the female figures. These stories are also firmly set in a specific historical and geographical context unlike some of Gordimer's short stories which are more "universal" in nature.

## 2. Theoretical Approaches

### 2.1 Post-colonial/Feminist Theory

When colonial rule began to fall apart in various corners of the world from the 1940s onwards, there arose the need for new theories to help analyse the impacts that colonialism had exerted, and continued to exert, on its subjects. The work of Frantz Fanon on the psychological effects of "being colonial" in *Black Skin, White Masks*<sup>14</sup> and the work of Edward Said on the relationship between "the West" and "the Orient" paved the field for a large body of theorising on the effects of colonialism both on the colonised as well as the coloniser. The term 'post-colonial' as such would refer to the time after the collapse of colonial rule, but it is widely accepted that post-colonial theory covers "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day".<sup>15</sup> Post-colonial literary studies have sought to answer questions such as: How is 'the imperial project' present even in such texts that do not explicitly speak of imperialism? How does a text comply with or challenge the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised? How does the literature after colonialism find its own language, both figuratively as well as literally?

Frantz Fanon's idea of the "Manicheism" inherent to colonialism, that is, the division of world into good and evil is the one of the central tenets of post-colonial theory. For Fanon

[...] the colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil [...] The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also

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<sup>14</sup> First published in English in 1986, originally published in France as *Peau Noire, Masques Blanc* (1952).

<sup>15</sup> Ashcroft et al.. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989. P. 2.

the negation of values. He is, let us dare admit it, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil.<sup>16</sup>

From this division into good and evil follows a division into further binary oppositions: self/other, civilisation/savagery, subject/object, coloniser/colonised.

The colonised people can be analysed as the other to the coloniser's self, an image of difference onto which the coloniser projects his/her own fears and desires.

The binary oppositions are in a dynamic interplay with each other. It is not only the coloniser that exerts influence over the powerless colonised subject:

Rather than being that other onto which the coloniser projects a previously constituted subjectivity and knowledge, native presences, locations, and political resistance need to be further theorised as having a determining or primary role in colonial discourses [...] In other words, the movement may have been as much from 'periphery' to 'centre' as from 'centre' to 'periphery'.<sup>17</sup>

To put it simply, a post-colonial critic is not only interested in how the coloniser has created the colonised but also in the cultural construction of the coloniser under changing political and ideological realities.

Critique of post-colonial theory soon began to emerge among feminist theorists on the "silencing" of women as subjects. Sara Mills has noted how "post-colonial theory has been a rather masculinist field: it examines those texts which represent the colonial/imperial context, primarily those written in the nineteenth century by British males".<sup>18</sup> Feminist theorists have drawn attention to the ways in which the issues of gender and ethnicity are in a dynamic interaction in the post-colonial setting. Feminist post-colonial critics have, for example, analysed the ways in which the presence of women in the "project" of imperialism (as wives and mothers or as campaigners for

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<sup>16</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth (Les Damnés de la Terre)* quoted in Jan Mohamed, 1983. p. 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Chrisman and Williams, eds. *Colonial discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Mills, Sara. "Post-Colonial Feminist Theory" in, Jackson et al. *Contemporary Feminist Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. p. 99.

equal rights) has both challenged as well as contributed to the notion of colonialism as the ultimate masculine endeavour. In her study of white women and racism, Vron Ware points out that the presence of women in the colonial scene contributed to the organising of ideas on race and civilisation and emphasises that we should ask what "the White Woman's Burden" was in the history of imperialism.<sup>19</sup>

A notable challenge towards both post-colonial and feminist theorists has been the emergence of female voices from the colonised "third" world to criticise the homogenising and essentialising effect of much of the work on the idea of the colonised woman. This critique has drawn attention to the presuppositions that many critics had been working with: that women could be categorised as a unified group on the basis of shared experience (of male oppression) everywhere. The seminal work of this new criticism is Chandra Talpade Mohanty's essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses"(1985). In this essay Mohanty criticises the representation of women as an ahistoric, essentialised group: "The assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally."<sup>20</sup> Much of subsequent criticism has been sensitive to the differences between women. Women and ethnicity/race in the (post)colonial context have become a subject of much critical interest. The work of the deconstructionist/feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the most challenging in this field. She employs the concept of "the

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<sup>19</sup> Ware, Vron. *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*. London/New York: Verso, 1992. p. 37

<sup>20</sup> Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Feminist Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in Williams and Chrisman, 1993. p. 199.

subaltern"<sup>21</sup> to denote a disenfranchised subject that deflects outside attempts to "know" it and assign it to a particular place in a system of power.

### 2.3 Subjectivity, Identity and Agency

What is a human being? What is a woman? The analytical debate between humanism and post-modernism about the essence of the human subject as being either something unitary or something that is constantly re-defined is an issue that has been central to both feminist as well as post-colonial criticism. The subject can be defined as an actor or an agent that either functions in the world or is subject *to* the circumstances of that world. Subjectivity is defined as an effect produced through particular discourses and ideologies. Karl Marx's summation that the social being of men [sic] determines their consciousness<sup>22</sup> is at the core of this view of the subject.

The critique of essentialism has sought to deconstruct the concept of identity into components of signification such as gender, race and class. Sally Robinson sums up the significance of post-modern thinking to feminism nicely when she says that "for feminist theory, the deconstruction of unitary identity has meant dismantling the humanist fiction of Western Man as universal subject and of Woman as the negative term which guarantees his identity."<sup>23</sup> This dismissal of a definitive essence allows for agency, the extent of the individual's ability to act in the world instead of being just acted upon to become a defining component of subjectivity. Sally Robinson further describes how this applies to the reading of literary characters:

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<sup>21</sup> The term originally comes from the Italian marxist critic Antonio Gramsci.

<sup>22</sup> Ashcroft et al. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London/New York: Routledge, 1998. P. 220.

<sup>23</sup> Robinson, Sally. *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Presentation in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991. p. 3.

[...] it is possible to read the plotting of subject-effects within and by any text as the process by which the text produces meaning, representation and self-representation. Such a reading goes beyond a focus on how texts written by women represent "female experience" toward a focus on how texts produce experience, identity, and gender.<sup>24</sup>

The analysis of agency is important when looking at texts written in a post-colonial framework, because it reveals something about the "ability of the post-colonial subject to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power."<sup>25</sup>

It is through the analysis of the individual subject in formation in the specific text that one is able to describe experience and agency from a female focus without reducing it to a representation of any "universal" female experience. I do not want to read Gordimer's female characters in relation to a homogenising notion of a "patriarchy" that constricts their actions, but rather want to examine how they negotiate their subject positions in relation to the specific social and political dynamics set up in the stories. Although post-modern philosophy has called into question the existence of "the grand narratives of history" in our time, I will nevertheless work with the notion that the female figures in Nadine Gordimer's stories can be read as being part of the historical narratives of decolonisation, national liberation and post-colonialism. I want to examine whether the female characters in Gordimer's short stories can be read as agents of history or whether history is simply acted upon them. More specifically, I want to examine in the framework of humanity that these stories set up whether it is possible for a white woman to confront the injustice of her own privileged position in a racially divided society and act to change things? Is it possible for a black woman to have a voice in a male-dominated struggle towards liberation? How is the burden of history present in the lives of the women in these stories?

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ashcroft et al, 1998. p.8

### 3. Moments of Realisation and Denial

This section will concentrate on two short stories from the early decades of Nadine Gordimer's career, "The Train from Rhodesia" and "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants". The two different female characters in these stories represent two differing positions towards their surroundings. These stories have been written in the 1950s and the 1960s when the mental climate of South Africa was rapidly changing with the strengthening grip of racial demarcation. The white rule was nevertheless already in crisis in many parts of Africa.

#### 3.1 "The Train from Rhodesia"

This story was originally published in 1953.<sup>26</sup> Though the story is very short (five pages), it can be analysed on a multiple of levels. The story is set on a railway station on a remote rural area and on a train passing through it. The focus of the story is initially on the depiction of the people at the railway station waiting for the in-coming train.

The stationmaster came out of his little brick station with its pointed chalet roof, feeling the creases on his serge uniform in his legs as well. A stir of preparedness rippled through the squatting native venders waiting in the dust; the face of a wooden animal, eternally surprised, stuck out of a sack. The stationmaster's barefoot children wandered over. From the grey mud huts with the untidy heads that stood within a decorated mud wall, chickens, and dogs with their skin stretched like parchment over their bones, followed the piccanins to the track. [...] They waited. (SS p. 43)

The description of the bare-foot children and the famished dogs paints an image of poverty. When the train has arrived at the station the focus shifts to a young woman

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<sup>26</sup> The story was initially published in the collection *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (1953). The quotes in this study are from the story as re-published in Nadine Gordimer's *Selected Stories*. (1975)

leaning out the window of the train, bargaining with one of the native venders<sup>27</sup> for a beautifully carved wooden lion. What the reader learns about this young woman is that she has recently married and is on her honeymoon. The wooden lion becomes central to the story when the husband starts bargaining with the vender after the young woman has already given up purchasing the lion.

Too expensive, too much, she shook her head and raised her voice to the old man, giving up the lion. He held it high where she had handed it to him. No, she said, shaking her head. Three-and-six? insisted her husband, loudly. Yes baas! laughed the old man. *Three-and-six?*--the young man was incredulous. Oh leave it--she said. The young man stopped. Don't you want it? he said, keeping his face closed to the old man. No, never mind, she said, leave it. The old native kept his head on one side, looking at them sideways, holding the lion. Three-and-six, he murmured, as old people repeat things to themselves. (SS p. 45)

It is revealed to the reader that the woman might have other reasons beside money for not wanting the lion. She has already bought a whole bunch of such animals on this trip, and she is unsure about their meaning to her: "How will they look at home? Where will you put them? What will they mean away from the places where you found them? Away from the unreality of the last few weeks?"(SS p. 45) The animals are not just insignificant objects to the woman, for her they signify the place of their origin and the people that made them. Although it is not made explicit in the story where the woman is from, it would seem like this is her first trip to Africa. The places she has visited in the past few weeks are described as "unreal" and "strange". For the woman this strangeness is bound together with her new phase of life, being married: "The young man outside. But he is not part of the unreality; he is for good now. Odd...somewhere there was the idea that he, that living with him, was part of the holiday, the strange places."(SS p. 45)

The dramatic turn of the story occurs when the husband gets in the coupé where the woman is sitting and presents her with the lion he has bought from the old vender at the

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<sup>27</sup> The original spelling of the word in the story will be used in my study instead of the more standard 'vendor'.

last minute when the train was already pulling away from the station: "I was arguing with him for fun, bargaining--when the train had pulled out already, he came tearing after... One-and-six Baas! So there's your lion." (SS p. 46) The young woman, instead of being pleased like the man expected her to be, is disgusted at the dishonour of the final bargain.

If you wanted the thing, she said, her voice rising and breaking with shrill impotence of anger, why didn't you buy it in the first place? If you wanted it, why didn't you pay for it? Why didn't you take it decently, when he offered it? Why did you have to wait for him to run after the train with it, and give him one-and-six? One-and-six! (SS pp. 46-7)

The woman is overcome by shame when she realises what her husband has done. The fact that he has pointlessly humiliated the old venter, who had exhibited his works with pride, marks a point of severance between the young woman and her husband.

Everything was turning round inside her. One-and-six. One-and-six. One-and-six for the wood and the carving and the sinews of the legs and the switch of the tail. The mouth open like that and the teeth. [...] To give one-and-six for that. The heat of shame mounted through her legs and body and sounded in her ears like the sound of sand pouring. Pouring, pouring. She sat there, sick. A weariness, a tastelessness, the discovery of a void made her hands slacken their grip, atrophy emptily, as if the hour was not worth their grasp. (SS p. 47)

This is the moment of realisation for the woman, she realises her own position as "superior" and the injustice inherent to it. Her husband has humiliated the old venter for fun because he *could*, because in this place he is "the master" over the black "natives". She and her husband are the white passengers, passing through the poverty and misery of the black neighbourhood, taking advantage of their superiority as they pass by. She feels the heat of shame on her body, and it is in her body that the source of the injustice is located: in the colour of her skin.

The influential Gordimer critic Stephen Clingman has noted how Gordimer's earliest short stories do not yet possess a political consciousness, but that "their major concern lies in the moments of psychological illumination, or in an exploration of the

human condition *per se*."<sup>28</sup> It is indeed the psychological insight of the woman that is the main event of "The Train from Rhodesia". However, there is a great deal that can be read between the lines of this story. It is, in my opinion, possible to see this story as a comment on colonialism as such. The story is set in southern Africa, which immediately creates the setting of the white minority ruling over the black population. In the beginning of the story the "natives" are waiting for the train, they are waiting for the white "masters" to come. The description of the train arriving at the platform, how it is "jerking, jostling, gasping" as it "fills" the station can be read in sexual, phallic terms as a reminder of the masculine "ideals" of colonialism. Furthermore, the train serves as a symbol of "progress" and modernity when juxtaposed with the mud huts and the grey tin houses it passes. The train leaves with the natives having received only petty gifts; some coins and sweets. The promise of progress has not been fulfilled.

When the train is on the platform, both the natives as well as their masters keep to their own places and roles, the white people inside the train, the black people down on the platform. Nobody gets on the train except those who have briefly stepped down: "A few men who had got down to stretch their legs sprang on to the train [...] perhaps merely standing on the iron step, holding the rail; but on the train, safe from the one dusty platform, the one tin house, the empty sand." (SS p. 45) The people inside are "safe" in their privileged positions, they are safe from the poverty and misery of the black natives.

The black vender addresses the husband as 'baas', which is a word implying a master's position in South Africa. There is even a parallel drawn between the description of the black venders and the wooden animals they are selling: "All up and down the

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<sup>28</sup> Clingman, Stephen. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1986. P. 22.

length of the train in the dust the artists sprang, walking bent, like performing animals, the better to exhibit the fantasy held towards the faces on the train." (SS p. 44) The racist notion of black people as animal-like is present in the text.<sup>29</sup>

Susan M. Greenstein has argued in an article on Gordimer's female characters that Gordimer's fiction is part of "the literature of empire" that deals with the "adventures" of white colonialists in Africa. Part of this literature is the white woman as an innocent, sheltered figure loaded with cultural implications of sexual/racial purity. In reference to Gordimer, Greenstein claims that

[...] even her acid ability to expose the bad faith that can infect the white desire for affiliation with blacks in South Africa cannot disguise the family resemblance to the literature of empire in which white adventurers seek exotic experience in the African "heart of darkness." Whether powered by white curiosity and guilt, or set in motion by admirable motives and the relative freedom of whites in South Africa to act on political fiction, it is a plot that always threatens to colonize black experience.<sup>30</sup>

It would be possible to read "The Train from Rhodesia" in this context. The white couple on their honeymoon, exploring the "strange" and "unreal" places in Africa, does adhere to the notion of adventure-seeking colonialists. However, it is through the realisation experienced by the female figure that this story effectively escapes from this category. She ultimately ends up rejecting the exotism she has previously been attracted to by refusing the wooden lion. She exchanges her "innocence" for knowledge. The young woman's moral awakening in this story would, then, serve as the first sign of the end of colonial oppression. But her anger is "impotent", which suggests lack of agency. She does not possess the means of struggling her way out of her political or personal situation. She is left sitting in her coupé with her husband as the train continues its journey. She is a participant in the project of colonialism whether she wants to or not.

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<sup>29</sup> See history of racism discussed in Miles, Robert. *Racism*. London: Routledge, 1989. Pp. 27-28.

<sup>30</sup> Greenstein, Susan M. "Miranda's Story: Nadine Gordimer and the Literature of Empire" in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1985. p. 230.

### 3.2 "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants"

This story, originally published in 1965<sup>31</sup>, is rather different in style from "The Train from Rhodesia". The main protagonist is a middle-aged woman working as a book-keeper at a Johannesburg garage. The story spans the time of a few weeks as it depicts the woman's brief relationship with a mysterious younger man. The real focus of the story, however, is on the woman's relationship to a black petrol attendant at the garage.

Throughout the story the woman describes her physical appearance to the reader: "I'm forty-nine but I could be twenty-five except for my face and my legs. I've got that very fair skin and my legs have gone mottled, like Roquefort cheese." (SS p. 234) The woman never names herself, instead she establishes her position as "very fair-skinned" from the beginning. The woman also sets herself above the black workers at the carage, she considers it her unofficial duty to keep an eye on them:

[...] you'll see me hanging about in front for a breath of air, smoking a cigarette and keeping an eye on the boys. Not the mechanics--they're all white chaps of course[...]but the petrol attendants. One boy's been with the firm twenty-three years--sometimes you'd think he owns the place; gets my goat. On the whole they're not a bad lot of natives, though you get a cheeky bastard now and then, or a thief, but he doesn't last long, with us. (SS p. 234)

The power-relation between the white woman and the black petrol attendants is laid out in the naming of each other: she is called "missus", which suggests impersonality and respect from the side of the black men. She refers to the black men as 'boys' which signals a sense of superiority, she even refers to one of the older men as an "old monkey-face"(SS p. 235). Nevertheless, she acknowledges one of the "boys", Jack, to be smarter than the rest and even establishes a friendship of a kind with him. The reason why this boy is more reliable is that he is more "white" in his manners than the others:

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<sup>31</sup> Originally published in the collection titled *Not For Publication*. The references in this thesis are to the story as republished in Nadine Gordimer's *Selected Stories*.

"[...] sometimes you find yourself talking to that boy as if he was a white person."

(SS p. 238) Jack is also made more "familiar" to the setting by his European name, which is different from his original African name. The woman is confused by this multitude of names:

This Jack used to get a lot of phone calls [...] and the natives on the other end used to be asking to speak to Mpanza and Makiwane and I don't know what all, and when I'd say there wasn't anyone of that name working here they'd come out with it and ask for Jack. So I said to him one day, why do you people have a hundred and one names, why don't these uncles and aunts and brothers-in-law come out with your name straight away and stop wasting my time?' He said 'Here I'm Jack because Mpanza Makiwane is not a name, and there I'm Mpanza Makiwane because Jack is not a name, but I'm the only one who knows who I am wherever I am.' I couldn't help laughing. (SS p. 235)

This re-naming of "the native" is a classic example of what in post-colonial theory is referred to as 'epistemic violence'. The concept has been applied most notoriously by G.C. Spivak to denote the way in which "the west" speaks about the rest of the world by using its own concepts and definitions. Epistemic violence takes away "third world people's" right to self-definition and denies them voice in the (post)colonial discourse. It seeks to "constitute the colonial subject as 'Other'."<sup>32</sup> By refusing to acknowledge "Jack" as Mpanza Makiwane, the woman aims at retaining her own sense of **self** as a woman in power.

The woman in the story becomes involved with a younger white man who appears at the garage one day. He claims to have come from Rhodesia and asks for the woman's help in finding a place to exchange money. She immediately reflects on the way she must appear in the eyes of this younger attractive man:

The fellow was young. He had that very tanned skin that has been sunburnt day after day, the tan you see on lifesavers at the beach. His hair was the streaky blond kind, wasted on men. He says, 'Miss, can't you help me out for half an hour?' Well, I'd had my hair done, it's true, but I don't kid myself you could think of me as a miss unless you saw my figure, from behind. (SS p. 236)

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<sup>32</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Extract from "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Ashcroft et al, eds. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 1995. pp. 24-25.

Despite the man being a stranger she gives him "the benefit of the doubt": after all he is a white man. He returns to the garage a few days later, this time to ask the woman's help in finding a place to stay. She arranges a room for him in a hotel run by a friend and he ends up coming to the woman's flat for a drink. The next day he comes back and this time the woman has the chance to assess him closer and finds him to be rather enigmatic:

I said to him while we were eating, is it a job you've come down for? He smiled the way youngsters smile at an older person who won't understand, anyway. 'On business.' But you could see that he was not a man who had an office, who wore a suit and sat in a chair. He was like one of those men you see in films, you know, the stranger in town who doesn't look as if he lives anywhere. [...] he did talk, but it was never really anything about himself, only about things he'd seen happen. He never asked me anything about myself, either. (SS p. 239)

The relationship between the woman and the stranger continues to deepen and even becomes sexual in nature. Though the woman is self-conscious of her age, the man assures her that the age-difference does not matter. After their first night together, the relationship becomes haunting for the woman. The man announces her that he might as well stay at her place since she is at work all day and that he has even left his hotel room without paying. The woman feels she has no choice but to accommodate him, though she does not feel comfortable in his presence. She even contemplates locking him out of the apartment, but does not get around to it because there is nothing *obviously* wrong with the man and because she is lonely:

He was such a clean, good-looking fellow standing there; and anybody can be down on his luck. I sometimes wonder what'll happen to me--in some years, of course--if I can't work any more and I'm alone here, and nobody comes. Every Sunday you read in the paper about women dead alone in flats, no one discovers it for days. (SS pp. 241-2)

The woman is caught between her growing fear of the strange man and her desire for him. He uses her desire to effectively manipulate her: "Oh he was nice to me then, I can tell you; he could be nice if he wanted to, it was like a trick that he could do, so real you couldn't believe it when it stopped just like that." (SS pp. 242-3)

Karen Lazar describes the anonymous man in "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" as "an incarnation of the exploitation of women".<sup>33</sup> She argues that the threatening atmosphere that surrounds the anonymous man in the story is the threat of sexual violence, which is "an enactment of generic power over and control of women by men."<sup>34</sup> The woman clings to the man as a typical victim of domestic power-play, unable to escape. I would argue, however, that what the woman is afraid of is also the threat of *political* as well as personal violence. What is revealed about the anonymous man in the story is that he has been involved in several recent conflicts in Africa, fighting alongside insurgents who aim at bringing down the white minority rule. He tells the woman how "he was in the Congo a few years ago, fighting for that native chief, what's-name--Tshombe--against the Irishmen who were sent out here to put old what's-name down." (SS p. 238-9) The man appears to be some kind of mercenary, looking for his next battle and pay-check, irrespective of his employer's political views. He does not seem to be on the side of the native Africans as he is unhappy with the notion of blacks gaining power: "[...] he said Central Africa was finished, he wasn't going to be pushed around by a lot of blacks running the show--from what he told me, it's awful, you can't keep them out of hotels or anything." (SS p. 241)

Alongside the woman's relationship with the young white man grows her relationship with the "boss-boy", Jack. Jack is the only person she can confide in to alleviate her anxieties; she cannot talk to her other friends for the sake of keeping up appearances: "I'd've felt safer if someone had known about him and me but of course I couldn't talk to anyone. Imagine the Versfelds. Or the woman I go out with on Fridays, I don't think she's had a cup of tea with a man since her husband died!" (SS p. 242) Jack is an "outsider" to her white circles and therefore she can talk to him although she does not tell him all the

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<sup>33</sup> Lazar in King, 1993, p.219

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

details of her relationship with the man. Although she does not believe in "discussing white people with natives" (SS p. 239), she comes to rely on Jack's opinions in her attempt to understand where the strange fellow is coming from and whether he is telling the truth about himself. Jack doubts the sincerity of the man from the start because his car seems too worn down for a long trip from Rhodesia. Jack even obtains a position of authority since he knows things that she does not. However, she immediately notices the shift in power and acts to correct it by making him run an errand for her:

I said to Jack, what's a '59 Chrysler worth? He took his time, he was cleaning his hands on some cotton waste. He said, 'With those tyres, nobody will pay much.' Just to show him he mustn't get too free with a white person, I asked him to send up to Mr. Levine for a headache powder for me. (SS p. 243)

The woman also questions Jack's estimation about the strange fellow's age, because "half the time natives don't know their own age, it doesn't matter to them the way it does to us." (SS p. 242) All the time she is very conscious of the division between 'us' and 'them'. There is a brief moment when she lets her guard down, however. She has told Jack about her loneliness and that her daughter lives abroad and he comments on this:

D'you know what that boy said to me then? They've got more feeling than whites sometimes that's the truth. He said, 'When my children grow up they must work for me. Why don't you live there in Rhodesia with your daughter? The child must look after the mother. Why must you stay alone in this town?' Of course I wasn't going to explain to him that I like my independence. I always say I hope I die before I become a burden to anybody. But that afternoon I did something I should've done long ago, I said to the boy, if ever I don't turn up for work, you must tell them in the workshop to send someone to my flat to look for me. And I wrote down the address. (pp.243-4)

The gesture of exchanging personal information of this kind suggests a tentative move towards finding a common ground, of acknowledging common humanity. The woman finds a sense of safety from Jack: "You know how it is when you're nervous, the funniest things comfort you: I'd just tell myself, well, if I shouldn't turn up to work in the morning, the boy'd send someone to see." (SS p. 244) Karen Lazar has noted how the setting in the story

reverses the traditional colonial imagery of the white man as the defender of the white woman against sexual threat from black men.<sup>35</sup>

The woman in the story seems rather ignorant about the struggles going on in Africa, as she cannot remember the names of the people (what's-name) involved in the struggle. What shocks her, however, is the notion of black people obtaining the same access to the public sphere as the whites. For the woman, her whiteness has served as an important aspect of her self-definition: Though she may be "under-class"(uneducatedness is suggested by her non-standard speech), at least she is superior to the majority of the people around her with the advantage of her skin-colour. This threat of political violence that might come to her doorstep as well, is a threat to her personal status. She makes a tentative gesture at reaching equality with the blacks when she forms a confidentiality with Jack but in the end chooses oblivion. Once the stranger has left her life and she no longer feels threatened, she dismisses Jack by scorning his intellectual endeavours:

[...] I think he fancies himself quite the educated man and he likes to read about all these blacks who are becoming prime ministers and so on in other countries these days. I never remark on it; if you take notice of things like that wit them, you begin to give them big ideas about themselves. (SS p. 245)

Thus, the woman reminds herself of the existing power relations between herself and Jack and puts him back into his "place". However, she must remain conscious of the changing political realities. She cannot forget that Jack is also Mpanza Makiwane who might one day rise to demand for his rights.

In 1963 Nadine Gordimer wrote a short essay called "Great Problems in the Street" in which she recollects on the brief period of open demonstrations on the streets of Johannesburg against apartheid legislation. The Sharpeville massacre in March of 1960 had marked a point of a new era in South Africa. Sixty-seven people had been killed by the

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 220.

police at a demonstration against the pass laws that constricted the movement of the non-white population. The same year the black resistance movements were outlawed and had to go underground. People were arrested for suspected political activity. In her essay Gordimer reflects on the gulf between those committed to the struggle and those wishing to stay oblivious to it:

For the gap between the committed and the indifferent is a Sahara whose faint trails, followed by the mind's eye only, fade out in sand. [...] Kindly and decent, within the strict limits of their 'own kind' (white, good Christians, good Jews, members of the country clubs - all upholders of the colour bar though not necessarily supporters of the Nationalist government), the indifferent do not want to extend that limit by so much as one human pulse reaching out beyond it. Where pretty suburban garden ends, the desert begins. (*EG*, p. 53)

In her short story "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" Gordimer explores the "indifferent" through the portrayal of a woman who ends up rejecting the idea of reaching out to people outside her "own kind". This is again a rather pessimistic view of women as agents of history. The short story probably reflects the general atmosphere of the time as it seemed increasingly impossible for a peaceful, democratic change to come about in South Africa. This story could almost be read as a warning: the indifferent need to open their eyes because change will inevitably come and in a form that threatens to overturn the foundations of their existence.

"The Train from Rhodesia" depicted the moment of realisation about the injustice of colonialism and racial inequality. The woman in the story did not possess the means of tackling with the question of inequality because of her status as an "insider"; a privileged white colonial woman with no real contact to the "natives". In "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants", boundaries between insiders and outsiders are more fragile. The moment of reaching beyond one's own barriers is rejected, however. Race continues to dominate as the most powerful marker of identity.

#### 4. Visions of Unity and Places of Rupture

In the 1970s the resistance against the oppressive political regime of South Africa became more politically committed and also more violent. In 1976 the schoolchildren in the township of Soweto rebelled against the imposition of the Afrikaans language as an obligatory subject. The result was a blood-bath as the police was sent in to quell the protests. Hundreds of people, mainly black children, died.<sup>36</sup> The mental climate of South Africa was now marked by whites' fear of retaliation and blacks' resentment and growing distrust of whites. Many anti-apartheid allegiances across the colour-bar were broken. White liberal humanist ideas against racism were seen as an insufficient means of tackling oppression. In "Letter from Johannesburg, 1976" Nadine Gordimer writes about the atmosphere in the aftermath of Soweto:

At the house of a liberal white couple an ancient rifle was produced the other evening, the gentle wife in dismay and confusion at having got her husband to buy it. [...] Pamphlets appear with threats to whites and their children; although the black movements repudiate such threats, this woman feels she cannot allow her anti-apartheid conviction to license failure to protect her children from physical harm. She needn't have felt so ashamed. We are all afraid. How will the rest of us end up? Here is the conflict of whites who hate apartheid and worked in 'constitutional' ways to get rid of it. The quotes are there because there's not much law-abiding virtue in sticking to a constitution like the South African one, in which only the rights of a white minority are guaranteed. (*EG*, p. 122)

International communism and the Black Consciousness movement became the banners under which the underground activists, who were labelled as terrorists by the South African government, gathered to fight for liberation. The beginning of independence and majority rule in many southern African states created pressure on the South African regime and gave hope of a different future.<sup>37</sup> Nadine Gordimer's writing in this era is marked by a heightened awareness of political activism which she

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<sup>36</sup> Omer-Cooper, J.D. *History of Southern Africa*. London: James Currey, 1994. pp. 225-226.

<sup>37</sup> Clingman in *Essential Gesture*, p. 261.

continues to depict through the portrayal of the individual caught in the racially bifurcated society. Her 1979 novel *Burger's Daughter* is the story of the daughter of a white South African communist who had dedicated his life to defending the rights of the black population and was sentenced to prison for it. The daughter is struggling between her loyalty to his political legacy and her desire to live outside the political struggle and outside South Africa.

Towards the end of the 1980s the political situation in South Africa began to show signs of change. Some of the apartheid laws most intrusive to people's private lives, such as the pass laws controlling the mobility of black people and the Mixed Marriages Act forbidding inter-racial marriage, were abolished.<sup>38</sup> The 1980s did nevertheless bring about further violence as the people in the townships revolted and were again met with the brutal force of the police and a state of Emergency was declared.<sup>39</sup> In another letter from Johannesburg in 1985 Gordimer describes the continuous disparity in the lives of whites and blacks:

In terms of *ways of life*, conditions of daily living are sinisterly much the same for all whites, those who manage to ignore the crisis in our country, and those for whom it is the determining state of mind. Some go to protest meetings, others play golf. All of us go home to quiet streets, outings to the theatre and cinema, good meals and secure shelter for the night, while in the black townships thousands of children no longer go to school, fathers and sons disappear into police vans or lie shot in the dark streets, social gatherings are around coffins and social intercourse is confined to mourning. (*EG*, p. 309)

In this section of my thesis I will discuss short stories written between the years 1975 and 1984. I will look at four stories that present their female characters in very different situations and positions. Starting with the white liberal woman in the turmoil of political change, I will proceed to look at the figure of the committed resistance fighter and finally move towards looking at black women whose lives are destroyed by

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<sup>38</sup> Freund, Bill. *The Making of Contemporary Africa*. London: Macmillan, 1998. p. 240

<sup>39</sup> Omer-Cooper, 1994. p. 23.

apartheid laws. In all of these stories there is an attempt to reach a unity of some kind, but the effort inevitably fails.

#### 4.1 "A Soldier's Embrace"

This fifteen page long story was published in the collection titled *A Soldier's Embrace* in 1980.<sup>40</sup> The story depicts an unnamed white couple caught in the turmoil of political change in an unnamed African country that is breaking away from colonial rule.<sup>41</sup> In her fiction Gordimer frequently employs the technique of leaving the specific time or locations unnamed to be able to explore the possible future directions for southern/South Africa. A case in point is her 1981 novel *July's People* that is set "in the near future" when the white rule in South Africa is coming to a violent end.

The story takes place on two levels: one is the narrative of the progress of events in the life of the well-to-do politically liberal white couple as the political climate of the country changes, the other one presents the woman as a private narrator, recollecting her brief encounter with two soldiers in a crowd. The story sets off with the woman caught in an ecstatic crowd of soldiers celebrating the cease-fire after years of warfare between the colonial army and the freedom fighters.

They were grinning and laughing amazement. That it could be: there they were, bumping into each other's bodies in joy, looking into each other's rough faces, all eyes crescent-shaped, brimming greeting. The words were in languages not mutually comprehensible, but the cries were new, a whooping and crowing all understood. She was bumped and jostled and she let go, stopped trying to move in any self-determined direction.(SE p. 8)

The woman gets caught as the third party in the embrace of two soldiers from the

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<sup>40</sup> The story quoted here as published in *A Soldier's Embrace*. London: Penguin, 1982.

<sup>41</sup> It has been suggested that Gordimer was here inspired by the independence gained by Mozambique and Angola from Portugal in the 1970s.

opposite sides of the past conflict. The description of the embrace lies

heavily on the details of the body and how the embrace feels like as a bodily experience

[...] the embrace opened like a door and took her in--a pink hand with bitten nails grasping her right arm, a black hand with a big-dialled watch and thong bracelet pulling at her left elbow. Their three heads collided gaily, musk of sweat and tang of strong sweet soap clapped a mask to her nose and mouth. They all gasped with delicious shock. They were saying things to each other. She put up an arm round each neck, the rough pile of an army haircut on one side, the soft negro hair on the other, and kissed them both on the cheek. (*SE* p. 8)

In her recollection of the embrace the woman cannot remember what was said between herself and the two soldiers, she only remembers the different sensations, sights and smells. She can remember the small bodily details about the two soldiers. The details are deconstructed in the glimpses the reader gets into to her private recollections.

The emphasis is on the differences that are visible at the level of skin-colour. The soldiers are nevertheless similar in the way that they both come from a class-position much lower than hers. The woman might have the same skin-colour as the soldier that had been shipped into Africa from Europe to serve in the colonial army, but she is keenly aware of the class difference between them.

The fingernails she sometimes still saw clearly were bitten down until embedded in a thin line of dirt all round, in the pink blunt fingers. The thumb and thick fingertips were turned back coarsely even while grasping her. Such hands had never been allowed to take possession. They were permanently raw, so young, from unloading coal, digging potatoes from the frozen Northern Hemisphere, washing hotel dishes. [...] There was unemployment in Europe where he had returned, the army didn't need all the young men any more. (*SE* p. 14)

The black soldier's hand is also described in detail. When the woman is looking at her friend Chipande's hand it brings up the memory of this other black hand.

Whatever the hand had done in the bush had not coarsened it. It, too, was suède-black, and elegant. The pale lining was hidden against her own skin where the hand grasped her left elbow. Strangely, black does not show toil--she remarked this as one remarks the quality of a fabric. (*SE* p. 16)

Her observation that "black does not show toil" draws the attention to the woman's position as someone who is used to seeing black people toil, while herself observing this from her place of power.

The idea of sexual desire and even sexual violence is touched upon as the woman reads in the newspaper that the day had ended in "drunkenness and whoring" for the celebrating soldiers. This leads the woman to think about why she had been taken into the embrace and how she feels about what she herself had done. Similarly as in "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" Gordimer again portrays a woman very self-conscious about her age and her attractiveness.

She was, apparently, not yet too old to belong to the soldier's embrace of all that a land-mine in the bush might have exploded for ever. That was one version of the incident. Another: the opportunity taken by a woman not young enough to be clasped in the arms of the one who (same newspaper, while the war was on, expressing the fears of the colonists for their women) would be expected to rape her. She considered this version. She had not kissed on the mouth, she had not sought anonymous lips and tongues in the licence of festival. Yet she had kissed. Watching herself again, she knew that. She had--god knows why--kissed them on either cheek, his left, his right. It was deliberate, if a swift impulse: she had distinctly made the move. (*SE* pp. 10-11)

The colonial fantasy-image of the rapable white woman is again pointed to, similarly as in "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants", where the threat of sexual/political violence invades the life of the middle-aged woman in the form of the strange younger man. Vron Ware has discussed the significance of controlling the threat of sexual violence in the colonial setting for the tenacity of colonial rule itself:

One of the recurring themes in the history of colonial repression is the way in which the threat of real or imagined violence towards white women became a symbol of the most dangerous form of insubordination. In any colony, the degree to which white women were protected from the fear of sexual assault was a good indication of the level of security felt by the colonial authorities.<sup>42</sup>

At no other time, then, would the threat of sexual violence be more acute than at the

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<sup>42</sup> Ware, 1992. P. 38

collapse of colonial rule.

When the woman comes home after her encounter with the rejoicing soldiers her lawyer-husband describes to her the festivities he has been watching from the balcony of his office-building. Both are excited about the collapse of colonial rule, and the husband has even been greeted with the official salute of the freedom fighters: "Oh I gave them the salute in return, chaps in the street saluted *me*...everybody was doing it. *It was marvellous*. And the police standing by; just to think, last month--only last week--you'd have been arrested." (*SE* p. 9) The woman does not tell her husband about the embrace with the kisses on two cheeks of different colour, she only mentions to him that she got caught in the good-natured crowd of soldiers for a minute. Her reason for not telling is not that he would "suspect licence in her" but that he would see her as "giving free expression to liberal principles." (*SE* p. 11)

The liberal political stance of the couple is signalled by the fact that they have black friends. Father Mulumbua is a priest and an active opponent of the colonial regime and has been in prison several times because of his conviction. The couple "had always been rather proud of their friendship with him, this man in a cassock who wore a clenched fist carved of local ebony as well as a silver cross round his neck." (*SE* p. 12) With the collapse of white minority rule there is a change of tone in the cross-cultural friendship. After a visit from Father Mulumbua the woman remarks to her husband that it had seemed like their friend had not felt comfortable enjoying their hospitality, although he had been to their house hundreds of times. "Before, yes", is what the husband replies. Now the previously disenfranchised are becoming the new leaders of the country. Another friend of the couple, Chipande, returns from exile. The young law-student become political activist had before been almost a "protégé" of the couple albeit "they didn't like the term, it smacked of patronage." (*SE* p. 14) Despite the deep

friendship, Chipande seems reluctant to discuss politics with the lawyer the way they had done before. It seems that such things can only be discussed "among black men themselves, now". (*SE* p. 16) The colour bar continues to dominate politics, only in reversed terms.

Life is now split into 'before' and 'what now?'. The white people in the country have to negotiate a new position to the changed circumstances and some of them respond to this challenge by emigrating. The couple initially attempts to adjust to the new order, indeed embrace it, although the fact that so many other white people are leaving the country creates uncertainties for their future as well. There are no more clients for the lawyer-husband: "[...] without the rich whites there was little litigation over possessions, whether in the form of the children of dissolved marriages or the houses and cars claimed by divorced wives. The Africans had their own ways of resolving such redistribution of goods." (*SE* p. 17) The fact that the couple employ an old black man as a servant becomes another source of unease. Muchanga had come to them from service in the house of the woman's father, a colonial officer. He is described as a simple man with no interest in politics and a strong sense of loyalty to his employers. The woman treats him with an air of leniency and even amusement at his fear of going out during the political upheavals: "Muchanga was being allowed to indulge in all manner of eccentric refusals; for no reason, unless out of some curious sentiment about her father?" (*SE* pp. 19-20)

The couple eventually decides to leave the country when the lawyer is offered a job in the neighbouring country. It is suggested, however, that the real reason for their leaving is the fact that they are afraid to stay. There are outbursts of violence and other disturbance on the streets: "Shops were being looted by the unemployed and loafers [...] who felt the new regime should entitle them to take what they dared not before."

(*SE* p. 19) The neighbourhood butcher, who had kept a grocery shop with a licence available only to white people, suddenly leaves although he had previously stated his commitment to the building of the new nation. The final separate glimpse into the woman's subjective experience in the story is when she realises she is starting to feel the same way as the people who have already left the country.

She avoided walking past the barracks because of the machine guns the young sentries had in place of rifles. Rifles pointed into the air but machine guns pointed to the street at the level of different parts of people's bodies, short and tall, the backsides of babies slung on mother's backs, the round heads of children, her fisherman's basket--she knew she was getting like the others: what she felt was afraid. She wondered what the butcher and his wife had said to each other. Because he was at least one whom she had known. He had sold the meat she had bought that these women and their babies passing her in the street didn't have the money to buy. (p. 20)

The woman feels like a potential target for anger because she realises that the material privileges she has been enjoying, like the fact that she has money to buy the meat that others cannot afford, are more decisive than the liberal ideals she might have had during the years of white oppression over the black majority.

When the couple leaves, they have to leave their servant Muchanga behind because "only whites were allowed in, at the country over the border." (*SE* p. 21) They set Muchanga up with a small business as a street-merchant. The story ends with the couple driving off towards the new country looking back at Muchanga: "[...] she knew he saw himself as a rich merchant; this was the only sort of freedom he understood after so many years as a servant. But she also knew, and the lawyer sitting beside her in the car knew she knew, that the shortage of the goods Muchanga could sell from his cart [...] would soon put him out of business." (*SE* p. 22) The guilt caused by the privileged position her whiteness allows her leaves the woman speechless, there is nothing more she can say to Muchanga: "She did not know what to call out to him as they drove away. The right words would not come again; whatever they were, she left them behind."

(SE p. 22) Her inability to find the right words can be read as a metaphor for the white colonists' dilemma in the new Africa: what can I say to the black Africans now that I no longer have the right to speak *for* them? What can I say for myself?

Abdul R. JanMohamed has argued that Gordimer's fictional characters continually debate between the conflicting desires of staying and leaving (South) Africa and that the desire to leave is a desire to "escape from history."<sup>43</sup> In this story the will to escape from history is realised through the decision to leave behind the newly emerged majority-ruled country and go across the border to the country where the white colonial rule still exists. The woman does not yet have to find her own answers to the black Africans.

Neither of the two soldiers in the story have enjoyed the same privileges in life that the woman has. The soldiers belong to the sphere of violence and the constant threat of death which contradicts with the nurturing, domestic world of the woman. Her physical actions in the story consist mostly of shopping for groceries and caring for her plants. She devotes considerable attention to the plants, and grieves when she has to leave them behind, which would seem almost absurd in a situation where people are being killed on the streets. It was only during the exceptional circumstances, the moment when "everything had to come to a stop" that the woman and the soldiers could for a brief moment meet as human beings celebrating the very fact that they were alive when so many had died.

Frantz Fanon claims that the process of decolonisation and national liberation is inevitably a violent process. It is only through the violent expulsion of the coloniser that the colonised (man) can become fully human: "The naked truth about decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and blood-stained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle

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<sup>43</sup> JanMohamed, 1983, p. 144.

between the two protagonists."<sup>44</sup> Violence is the ultimate rupture in the hope for unity in this story. It is not the sexual violence that is hinted at in the story but the inevitable violence of the process of liberation.

#### 4.2. "Something Out There"

This story could more accurately be defined as a novella as its' over 80 pages comprise nearly half of the collection titled *Something Out There* (1984). The title of the story refers to the two different layers in the story: there are reports of an unidentified animal lurking around the suburbs of Johannesburg at night, it is "something out there" that upsets the security of the affluent white suburbs. The main part of the story describes a group of militants preparing for an act of sabotage. The underground activists fighting against the apartheid state are another example of something "in the dark", threatening to overturn the lives of the privileged. I will only focus on a specific segment of the multi-layered story here, namely its' main female characters. My primary interest is on the character of the young white woman called Joy, who is a member of a group of underground activists. Joy is strongly contrasted with the character of the older Afrikaner woman, Mrs Naas Klopper. There is an element of betrayal and a fundamental lack of understanding between the two women as Joy presents herself as a "normal" young wife to Mrs Klopper. Mr Klopper leases her and her male comrade Charles an old farm-house, "the Kleynhans plot", which they use as a secret base in helping two black underground militants prepare for an act of sabotage against a near-by power plant.

The narrative starts with the portrayal of Mrs Naas Klopper. The very fact that she

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<sup>44</sup> "Decolonizing, National Culture and the Negro Intellectual" in Lemert, Charles. *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*. Boulder/Oxford: Westview Press, 1999. P. 360.

calls herself by her husband's name instead of her own reveals her conservative nature. Furthermore, she is described as being preoccupied with the maintenance of the domestic sphere: "She sat in the split-level lounge of what she was always quietly aware of as her 'lovely home' Naas had built according to her artistic ideas [...]" (*SOT* p. 120)<sup>45</sup> While she is reading a newspaper, the story of the unknown creature appearing on people's backyards makes her very conscious of the fact that most of the things she reads about in the paper bear no relevance to her life.

[...] this monkey or whatever it was gave you something to wonder about again, talk about; it had something to do with your own life, it could happen to you [...] not like that other stuff, that happened somewhere else, somewhere you'd never seen and never would, the United Nations there in New York, or the black's places--Soweto." (*SOT* p. 120)

The mention of the United Nations can be read as a reference to the international pressure and economic sanctions put on South Africa from the 1960s to the 1980s as a protest against its apartheid policies.<sup>46</sup>

It is in Mrs Naas Klopper's domestic haven of ignorance that the underground militant Joy makes her first appearance in the story. She and her companion Charles are invited to her lounge for tea while they discuss the prospects of finding a house in the region. The Kloppers immediately acknowledge the difference between themselves and the young couple who speaks English instead of Afrikaans. The Kloppers make the effort to make the couple feel welcome by speaking English to them. Charles introduces Joy to Mrs Klopper under the pseudonym "Anna". Mrs Klopper expresses her approval of the name as it is also a "good Afrikaans name". (*SOT* p. 120) Later in the story the couple add to their cover story by saying they are from Australia (when in fact they are South Africans) and that the young wife is pregnant with their first child.

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<sup>45</sup> *Something Out There*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1984.

<sup>46</sup> Ross, Robert. *A Concise History of South Africa*. Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1999. p. 166.

When the couple is settling in at their farm house, Mrs Klopper makes a surprise visit. At the sight of the girl Mrs Klopper scrutinises her unattractive looks compared with her own feminine appearance:

Mrs Naas saw that she had interrupted the girl in the middle of some dirty task--of course, settling in. The dull hair was broken free of the knot, on one side. Hooked behind an ear, it stuck to the sweaty neck. The breasts (Mrs Naas couldn't help noticing; why don't these young girls wear bras these days) were squashed by a shrunken T-shirt and the feet were in split *takkies*.<sup>47</sup> The only evidence of femininity to which Mrs's Naas's grooming could respond (as owners of the same make of vehicle, one humble, one a luxury model, passing on the highway silently acknowledge one another with a flick of headlights) was the Indian dingley-dangleys the girl wore in her ears, answering the big fake pearls sitting on Mrs Naas's plump lobes. (*SOT* p. 133)

Mrs Naas makes the attempt to make the young woman fit into her idea of womanhood. Furthermore she seeks closeness with the girl by enquiring about her "pregnancy" and giving motherly advice: "Mrs Naas saw that the girl, expecting in a strange country, must be comforted to have a talk with a motherly woman." (*SOT* p.134)

Mrs Naas defines herself on the basis of her duties as a woman and assumes that the young woman feels the same way.

Joy and Charles are joined at the farm by two black men. Joy's position as a white woman in the group of militants is seemingly equal to everyone else's but the difference between her and the two black men is nevertheless made explicit. Vusi, one of the two black men expresses his concern when Mrs Naas makes her surprise visit to bring Joy a tin of biscuits as a present. Joy explains to him how it is a normal custom and nothing suspicious:

Don't you give something --take food when new neighbours move in?--As she heard herself saying it, she remembered that whatever the custom was among blacks--and god knows, they were the most hospitable if the poorest of people--he hadn't lived anywhere that could be called 'at home' for years and his 'neighbours' had been fellow refugees in camps and military training centres.

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<sup>47</sup> Sneakers in English.

She gave him her big, culpable smile to apologize for her bourgeois naïvety; it still surfaced from time to time, and it was best to admit so, openly. (*SOT* p. 135)

For Joy admitting culpability is part of her commitment to resistance. She also reveals to her comrades that her grandfather had been a magistrate in the service of South Africa, sending people to jail.

The two black men have their own expectations for Joy that she fails to meet. They are surprised when Joy wants to help them in construction work. Vusi and Eddie compare Joy to the women they have known before: "They would rather have had her cook better meals for them than help with what they could have managed for themselves [...] a black woman would always cook every night for her lover, indeed for all the men in the house." (*SOT* p. 144) Despite the differences the four resistance fighters form a tight group, a family of a kind, while they are waiting at the farm for the right time for the attack. It is suggested that the unity is built around Joy. It is her openness that helps bring down the barriers between the people that are strangers to each other, only momentarily joined because of a common agenda:

They all laughed with her, at her. As Vusi remarked once when the black men talked in the privacy of their own language, 'Joy' was a funny kind of cell-name for that girl, without flesh or flirtatiousness for any man to enjoy. Yet she was the one who came out bluntly with things that detached the four of them from their separate, unknown existences that would be taken up ahead, and made a life of their own together, in this house and yard. (*SOT* p. 144)

But could this unity built around resistance and comradeship last? In her analysis of women's role in political liberation the African-American feminist critic bell hooks notes how women are often only temporarily accepted as "comrades in struggle" in liberationist movements and that the old sexist patterns of behaviour are reinstated when the crisis is over.<sup>48</sup> In the case of Joy and the black men the power

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<sup>48</sup> hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.

relations are more complicated, though. It is questionable whether they can really be equal at any point. For the white revolutionaries it is easier to act because they can move about with the help of their privileged position. As whites they are less suspect. Even the media gives more importance to their involvement: "[...] one white revolutionary was worth fifty blacks." (*SOT* p. 198)

Gordimer has dealt with the notion of a white woman and black men as comrades in a story titled "Comrades" (*Jump and Other Stories*, 1991).

In this story a white woman who is a member of a non-racial committee of activists invites a group of young black men to get something to eat after a conference. While watching the hungry young men eat around her table and hearing how they are deprived of proper education and have already been in prison, she realises that it is young men like these paying the price for liberation:

She looks at them all and cannot believe what she knows: that they, suddenly here in her house, will carry the AK-47s they only sing about, now, miming death as they sing. They will have a career of wiring explosives to the undersides of vehicles, they will go away and come back through the bush to dig holes not to plant trees to shade home, but to plant land-mines. (*JO* p. 96)

Although the young men address the woman as "comrade", she realises the disparity between herself and them.

"Something Out There" ends in a news paper-style report of the events after the planned attack on the power station is carried out. The lodgings of the four militants are discovered and Mr and Mrs Naas Klopper are interviewed. The story is of special interest to the media because of the involvement of white people in an act of sabotage. Mrs Naas will only speak to the Afrikaner press, though, because the English press "would always twist in a nasty way something innocent that Afrikaners said." (*SOT* p. 197) There is an element of self-pity present when Mrs Naas talks to reporters. She feels betrayed as the couple sitting in her living-room had seemed like "such polite young

people". Because of the colour of their skin, the two revolutionaries had been able to pass for people that have the same world view as the Kloppers.

Nira Yuval-Davis has discussed the role of gender in the cultural construction of nations. She analyses women's role as the biological and cultural reproducers of a nation: how women are responsible for the future of the nation through giving birth and raising children and for being symbolic "border guards" of culture through specific styles of dress, behaviour and customs.<sup>49</sup> In "Something Out There" the figure of Mrs Naas can clearly be assigned the role of biological and cultural reproducer of the white South African nation. She is a mother of four children and she acts in a motherly way towards the other white woman. Anne McClintock points out the special significance of motherhood for the popular imagery of Afrikaner history. Although largely confined to the private sphere, as guardians of the household the Afrikaner women were responsible for the continuation of Afrikaner culture: "[White women] were complicit in deploying the power of motherhood in the exercise and legitimation of white domination."<sup>50</sup>

Mrs Naas's lounge is described as a bastion of the cultural re-production of Afrikaner identity:

[...] Mrs Naas's split-level lounge, which had been so lovingly constructed, the slasto fireplace chosen stone by stone by Naas himself, the beasts whose skins covered the bar-stools shot by him, the tapestry made stitch by stitch by Mrs Naas in security against the rural poverty of the past and in certainty that these objects and artifacts were what civilization is. (*SOT* p. 198)

The fact that Afrikaners have a history of being the "poor whites" of the country<sup>51</sup> is pointed at. The world that Mrs Naas has built around her is what she believes to

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<sup>49</sup> Yuval-Davis, Nira. *Gender and Nation*. p. 23

<sup>50</sup> McClintock, 1995, p. 379.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p. 368.

represent civilisation. Joy, however, has consciously rejected her role as the reproducer of the white nation and built herself a new identity based on resistance:

She would not have been here if she had not found her own re-education, after the school where she had sung for God to save white South Africa. Without that re-education she would not have come to know herself, for certain, that she could not now be bearing classified children (white) while living in a white suburb like that of the house with a view where she had grown up. She could not be anywhere but on the Kleynhans plot with a view of the power station. (*SOT* p. 179)

For Joy, personal identity in a racist society can only be constructed on action towards dismantling that society.

"Something Out There" can be read as an elaboration on the comment that Gordimer makes in her letter from Johannesburg about the two conflicting ways of thinking that white people had in 1980s South Africa. There are those who manage to ignore the crisis and those for whom it is the determining state of mind. Mrs Naas Klopper is as detached from the political reality as the woman in "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants". Joy on the other hand is described as having little feminine appeal but a solid identity based on the conscious rejection of the traditional female role offered to her by the segregationist nation. The different histories and interpretations of reality that the Afrikaners and the English speaking population of South Africa have are an aspect not to be ignored. Apartheid was a construction based heavily on Afrikaner beliefs and national myths. While the "English" were by no means innocent of the crimes generated by apartheid, it was the English speaking whites that largely opposed to the regime, although only few of them went as far as Joy in "Something Out There" in their commitment to resistance. Even in today's multi-ethnic, democratic South Africa, there still exists a small group of Afrikaners who have resisted the majority rule and continued to live separately. In the rural town of Orania in the central part of South Africa, some one hundred Afrikaners have established an all-white community that

continues to uphold Afrikaner traditions and dreams about having their own nation-state one day.<sup>52</sup>

### 4.3. "Town and Country Lovers"

The pair of short stories titled "Town and Country Lovers" was published in the collection *A Soldier's Embrace*. In these stories Gordimer examines the ruptures in the relationships of people across the colour-line through the employment of the South African apartheid legislation as the background. Both stories depict a white man having a sexual relationship with a black woman and explore how the relationship is destroyed by the intervention of the racist state.

The Immorality Act of 1957 made sexual contacts between whites and other racial groups illegal until the year 1985. Throughout these years tens of thousands of people were brought to trial for breaking the law, thousands were imprisoned and countless numbers faced social difficulties as the after-effects of being subjected to criminal investigation.<sup>53</sup>

The first story begins with the introduction of Dr. Franz-Josef von Leinsdorf, an Austrian geologist working for a South African mining company. He has been working in different parts of Africa for the past seven years but has "no interest in the politics of the countries he works in." (*SE* p. 74)<sup>54</sup> He is described as a good-looking man with cultivated interests. In a supermarket next to the apartment building he is residing in, he meets a coloured girl cashier who unexpectedly offers to help him by bringing him some

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<sup>52</sup> Article by Norbert Neumann in the German magazine *Geo*, March 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Omond, Roger. *The Apartheid Handbook*. pp. 30-35

<sup>54</sup> *A Soldiers Embrace*. London: Penguin, 1982

razor-blades that are temporarily out of stock. Dr von Leinsdorf immediately notices that the girl is not like most young coloured girls, who are "usually pretty unhelpful" (*SE* p. 75) When the girl later appears in front of his apartment building, he stakes stock of her appearance as compared to other "coloured" women:

She was rather small and finely-made, for one of them. The coat was skimpy but no big backside jutted. The cold brought an apricot-graining of warm colour to her cheek-bones, beneath which a very small face was quite delicately hollowed and the skin was smooth, the subdued satiny colour of certain yellow wood.  
(*SE* p. 76)

The girl offers to get him the blades from the supermarket and he asks her to bring them to his flat. Being inside such a building is a new experience for the girl, who lives in a township. She acts as though she had the same right to be there as anyone else: "she didn't wait for the lift marked GOODS but took the one meant for whites". (*SE* p. 76) She refuses to take a tip from the man: "She was smiling, for the first time, in the dignity of refusing the tip." (*SE* p. 77) He feels obliged to invite her in for a cup of coffee. Being inside a white man's apartment is also something new to her, she recognises that she is out of place: "Her eyes went over everything in the flat although her body tried to conceal its sense of being out of place by remaining as still as possible [...]" (*SE* p. 77)

The two come to an agreement about the girl helping him around the flat.

The arrangement changes into an intimate relationship and the girl spends a great deal of time at the flat. The two live together almost like husband and wife, with the exception that they cannot be seen together in public. He begins to educate her, as he sees that she might, with the benefit of her not-so-black skin, be able to "edge a little farther into the white-collar category". (*SE* p. 81) The girl dreams about a future with the white man, albeit her dreams are contained within realistic possibilities:

While she sat at her typewriter she thought how one day she would type notes for him, as well as making coffee the way he liked it, and taking him inside her body without saying anything, and sitting (even if only through the empty streets of quiet Sundays) beside him in his car, like a wife. (*SE* p. 81)

The life of the lovers is brought to an abrupt halt by a knocking at the door one summer night. She immediately realises the danger in what is happening and prevents him from answering the door. She goes to hide in the bedroom closet but he does not understand why she is acting so frantically:

Although his arms and calves felt weakly cold he was horrified, distastefully embarrassed at the sight of her pressed back crouching there under his suits and coat; it was horrible and ridiculous. *Come out!* He whispered. *No! Come out!* She hissed: *Where? Where can I go? Never mind! Get out of there!* He put out his hand to grasp her. At bay, she said with all the force of her terrible whisper, baring the gap in her teeth: *I'll throw myself out the window.* (SE p. 82)

Dr von Leinsdorf answers the door to three policemen who inform him that they know he has someone in the flat because the flat has been monitored for three months.

The policemen ransack the flat and eventually find the girl in a locked cupboard. The two are taken to the police station and the girl is subjected to a medical examination to find out whether sexual intercourse has taken place:

[The district surgeon] motioned her to lie on a white-sheeted high table where he placed her legs apart, resting in stirrups, and put into her where the other had made his way so warmly a cold hard instrument that expanded wider and wider. Her thighs and knees trembled uncontrollably while the doctor looked into her and touched her deep inside with more hard instruments, carrying wafers of gauze. (SE p. 83)

The story ends in a stylistic rupture as the following court-case is narrated in a newspaper style report. The couple is acquitted of the charges of contravening the Immorality Act because "the State failed to prove carnal intercourse had taken place". (SE p. 84)

The fact that the girl is never named in the story suggests that she is part of the great mass of people whose lives are affected by apartheid policies. She fails to reach into a more privileged life than her skin colour would designate to her and she becomes the victim of the system of male violence. She becomes an **object** of study for government officials. The post-colonial critic Trin T. Minh-Ha talks about the policies of separateness created by white South Africans to keep the non-whites "in their place":

"You may keep your traditional law and tribal customs among yourselves, as long as you and your own kind are careful not to step beyond the assigned limits."<sup>55</sup> The girl in this story is punished for her effort to try to reach outside the limits assigned to her.

The second story of the two takes place in a rural setting. Paulus Eysendyck is the son of a white farmer, Thebedi is the daughter of black farm workers. They have been playing together as children at the farm normally do, until a point of rupture is reached in their respective education: "once the white children go away to school they soon don't play together any more". (SE p. 86) With the onset of adolescence the black children start to call their old playmates "*missus* and baasie--little master." (SE p. 86) Paulus and Thebedi, however, do not lose their friendship: he brings her presents and tells her tales of the life at his boarding school. Sexual attraction eventually builds between the two as they spend time together at a riverside bank. The farmer's son is more attracted to Thebedi than the girls of his "own kind":

The schoolgirls he went swimming with at dams or pools on neighbouring farms wore bikinis but the sight of their dazzling bellies and thighs in the sunlight had never made him feel what he felt now, when the girl came up the bank and sat beside him, the drops of water beading off her dark legs the only points of light in the earth-smelling, deep shade. They were not afraid of one another, they had known one another always [...] (SE p. 88)

The two start to meet secretly, first at the river-bank and then at the farm house when the boy's parents are away from home. The girl nevertheless has a different life among the black people on the farm that the farmer's son knows nothing about. A marriage is arranged between Thebedi and Njabulo, another black labourer on the farm. Thebedi does not tell the farmer's son that she is going to marry or that she thinks she is going to have a baby. When the baby is born, it does not look exactly like expected:

But the infant was very light and did not quickly grow darker as most African babies do. Already at birth there was on its head a quantity of straight, fine floss, like that which carries the seeds of certain weeds in the veld. The unfocused eyes

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<sup>55</sup> Minh-Ha, Trinh T. "Writing Post-Coloniality and Feminism" in Ashcroft et al, 1995. p. 265.

it opened were grey flecked with yellow. Njabulo was the matt, opaque coffee-grounds colour that has always been called black; the colour of Thebedi's legs on which beaded water looks oyster-shell blue, the same colour as Thebedi's face, where the black eyes, with their interested gaze and clear whites, were so dominant. (*SE* p. 90)

Although it is obvious that Thebedi has given birth to a white man's child, Njabulo takes the baby as his own. When the farmer's son is home for holidays he hears that Thebedi has had a baby and immediately goes to see her. The sight of the baby he has fathered makes him despair:

He struggled for a moment with a grimace of tears, anger and self-pity. She could not put out her hand to him. He said, 'You haven't been near the house with it?' She shook her head. 'Never?' Again she shook her head. 'Don't take it out. Stay inside. Can't you take it away somewhere. You must give it to someone--' She moved to the door with him. He said, 'I'll see what I will do. I don't know.' And then he said: 'I feel like killing myself.' (*SE* p. 91)

A few days later the farmer's son returns to Njabulo and Thebedi's cottage and spends some time alone with the baby. The next day the baby is dead. Thebedi is in a state of paralysis: "She did not cry but simply sat, staring at the door." (*SE* p. 92) After the baby is buried, the police turn up at the farm:

The police came and dug up the grave and took away the dead baby: someone--one of the labourers? their women?--had reported that the baby was almost white, that, strong and healthy, it has died suddenly after a visit by the farmer's son. Pathological tests on the infant showed intestinal damage not always consistent with death by natural causes. (*SE* p. 92)

Another court-case is reported. Paulus Eysendyck is charged with murder. In her first appearance in the witness box Thebedi accuses the farmer's son of killing her baby but withdraws her accusation at the trial a year later: "She came to court with a new-born baby on her back. She wore gilt hoop ear-rings; she was calm; she said she had not seen what the white man did in the house." (*SE* p. 93) The case ends with the verdict of 'not guilty'. Thebedi would probably know that her chances of getting justice for her murdered baby are slim in a system dominated by white males. She has to renounce her relationship with the farmer's son as a thing of the past:

Interviewed by the Sunday papers, who spelled her name in a variety of ways, the black girl, speaking in her own language, was quoted beneath her photograph: 'It was a thing of our childhood, we don't see each other any more.' (SE p. 93)

For Thebedi moving on with her life is a strategy of survival. She is now "speaking in her own language", which suggests that she has found her identity through identification with her own people instead of the "white people's world" she was briefly and partially admitted to through her relationship with Paulus Eysendyck. Unlike the nameless girl in the first story, Thebedi escapes becoming completely victimised by rejecting her past and embracing a clean break from the system of white dominance.

The fact that sexual oppression is deeply rooted inside racial oppression is made clear in these two stories, where racial oppression manifests itself by invading the sexual privacy of individuals. Despite Gordimer's claims about the primacy of anti-racism over anti-sexism, in these two stories she has showed awareness for the complexity of oppression. The words of Trin T. Minh-Ha capture the point: "The pitting of anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles against one another allows some vocal fighters to dismiss blatantly the existence of either racism or sexism within their lines of action, as if oppression only comes in separate, monolithic forms."<sup>56</sup>

The theme of illicit relationships is also addressed by Gordimer in a later short story called "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off" (*Jump and Other Stories*, 1991). In the story a white man, Marais van der Vyver, accidentally shoots one of his black farm boys. To an outsider the farmer would represent all the negative stereotypes about white South African men: he is an active member of the National Party and wants uphold the white rule in the country. The death of the black man on his farm could be seen as an extreme act of oppression and contribute to the notion of white South Africans as brutal

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<sup>56</sup> Minh-Ha, Trin T. "Writing Post-coloniality and Feminism" in Ashcroft et al, 1995. p. 268.

racists in eyes of the foreign press. Marais van der Vyver, however, acts in a way that does not support the idea of him as a callous murderer. He cries when he goes to the report the accident at the police station and provides an elaborate funeral for the dead boy. At the end of the story a terrible irony is revealed: the dead boy was Van der Vyver's son. At the funeral the boy's mother and the white farmer, with his wife beside him, stare down at the coffin. They cannot look at each other as they cannot grieve together because the truth about the boy would destroy the white man's reputation. This story can be seen as a continuation to the story of Paulus Eysendyck and Thebedi in "Town and Country Lovers". Although this story tells the reader that the times have changed, "the Immorality Act has gone, blacks can sleep with whites" (*JO* p. 114), it also serves as a reminder that there are things that cannot yet be talked about.

## 5. The Voice of the Silent Masses

In this section I will continue to examine some of the black female characters Gordimer has created. I will also briefly discuss the criticism that has been levelled at white women "speaking/writing for" black or "third world" women.

In the era of apartheid the black women of South Africa had in many ways the most difficult lot. The migrant labour system created to meet the needs of white South African economy often resulted in the break-up of families as black men left home to work in the mines and the cities and the women stayed behind in the poverty-stricken homelands.<sup>57</sup> For practical purposes the men often had two families: one in the city where they worked and one in the homeland they visited only a few times a year.

Political agency for black women has been an especially problematic issue. Anne McClintock claims that the role black women were offered in the organised struggle for freedom in the ANC was often the role of a domestic carer attending to the needs of male activists. McClintock further claims that the exclusion of black women from full political membership nevertheless did not discourage them from engaging in various forms of grass-root level activism, such as protests against the pass laws, buss and rent boycotts, strikes and anti-rape protests.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Omond, 1986. Pp. 112-114.

<sup>58</sup> McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. 380-382.

## 5.1 "A City of the Living, a City of the Dead"

This story was published in the collection *Something Out There* (1984). It explores how the life of a black woman is changed when her husband lets an underground resistance fighter use their house as a hide-out. The story ends with a betrayal as the woman informs the security police about the man staying in her house. The story also addresses the issue of the poor living-conditions of the black people in South Africa.

The story begins with a female voice making a link between female and male experience: "You only count the days if you are waiting to have a baby or you are in prison." (*SOT* p. 10) The story takes place in a township house. The tenants of the house are Samson and Nanike Moreke and their baby. Another female tenant lives in the living room and another family are sub-tenants in the garage. Furthermore, various relatives sometimes stay in the house, along them the Morekes' older children who live with other relatives in country villages. Samson Moreke is described as a man who has made a relatively nice home for himself, he has decorated the house with things that have been discarded by his (white) employers. He reads the newspapers and has a wide social circle around him. He reads the reports about political meetings disguised as church meetings but does not attend them. Nanike Moreke is at home taking care of her "fifth living" baby, "living" suggesting that she has lost children due to the conditions she lives in. She is described as "a good woman", a good house-keeper and a loving mother, who does not indulge in indecent behaviour:

She takes a beer or two herself, but although she is in her early thirties and knows she is still pretty--except for a missing front tooth--she does not get flirtatious or giggle. She is content to sit with the new baby in her lap, in the sun, among men and women like herself, while her husband tells anecdotes which make them laugh or challenge him. He learns a lot from the newspapers. (*SOT* p. 13)

When Samson Moreke tells his wife that her cousin has asked them to accommodate a friend for a few days, she is not very welcoming. Moreke explains to her how this friend is different and must therefore be welcomed: "This one's in trouble. You don't read the papers...the blowing up of that police station...you know, last month? They didn't catch them all...It isn't safe for Mtembu to keep him any longer. He must keep moving." (*SOT* p. 14) The fugitive man settles in. He has to stay inside the house all the time so as not to be discovered. Nanike and the man spend all their days together and she has time to assess him. She notices the difference between him and the other people she has known: "He never takes off the gold ear-ring, even when he sleeps. [...] I don't know what the ear-ring means; when I was a child there were men who came to work on the mines who had ear-rings, but in both ears--country people. He's a town person; another one who reads newspapers. (*SOT* p. 14) Shisonka tells Nanike and her husband stories about the far-away places he has seen while being in exile, also about the oldest city in the African continent that had a city of the dead as well as a city of the living. He tries to educate Samson Moreke in the "right" way that black people should live when he criticises the fact that one of his children is at a mission school: "You shouldn't send him away from here, *baba*. You think it's safer, but you are wrong. It's like you and the meetings. The more you try to be safe, the worse it will be for your children." (*SOT* p. 23)

Shisonka also brings a gun to the Moreke house. A bond of intimacy develops between Nanike and Shisonka through a shared secret about the gun: "He never takes out the gun when Samson's here. He knows only he and I know about it." (*SOT* p. 21) It is suggested that the intimacy between the two could go even further, but Nanike is not attracted to the man. Furthermore, she does not like to get too involved with him so as not to risk getting associated with this fugitive man:

[...] he sat at the kitchen table laughing at me, smiling, as if I was a young girl. I forgot--I felt I was a girl. But I don't really like that that kind of face, his face--light-skinned. You can never forget a face like that. If you are questioned, you can never say you don't remember what someone like that looks like. (*SOT* p. 21)

Nanike notices the light tone of the man's skin, which also differentiates him from the majority of people. His colour makes him more fallible: "it means people notice you. It must be very hard to hide." (*SOT* p. 16)

The Morekes and Shisonka stay inside and pretend that no-one is home so that people won't notice the strange man. After days of being secluded inside the house, Nanike says she has to go buy milk for the baby. In fact, she goes to the police station. When Nanike is about to leave the house she is described, in contrast to Shisonka, as someone who blends in with the masses: "She stood there, in her over-trodden slippers, her old skirt and cheap blouse--a woman not to be noticed among every other woman in the streets." (*SOT* p. 25) She betrays Shisonka to a white officer: "[...] she told in English--"There, in my house, 1907 Block C. He has been there a week. He has a gun." (*SOT* p. 26) Afterwards, Nanike says she does not know why she did it. Now she is despised in her community: a woman spits her in the face on the street.

Why does Nanike betray her own people? Does she reject the strangeness of the man in her house, telling her and her husband how they should lead their lives while leading a life outside such domesticity himself? Is it because she has been kept ignorant, because she does not "read the papers" like her husband and does not understand the significance of the armed resistance to her people? Or is she protecting her own sphere from the threat of violence and torture? Her husband and herself take an enormous risk when hiding a fugitive in their house, they risk being interrogated and imprisoned themselves. There is also an irony in the contrast created between the husband and the wife. While Samson Moreke reads about the struggle, he does not participate in it.

Nanike **acts**, but her action is detrimental to the cause as a whole. Nanike is an agent of

her own life, but she either refuses or is denied political agency. G.C. Spivak has noted how the subaltern woman has remained mute in the socio-political discourses dealing with the third world.<sup>59</sup> Here, in a fictional text written by a white woman, the muted black woman is given a voice. She is a subaltern who speaks but her answer surprises and unsettles the reader.

Dorothy Driver has discussed the politicisation of Nadine Gordimer's female characters and she also touches upon "A City of the Living, a City of the Dead". She describes Nanike as a "house-proud, bourgeois woman" and claims that Nanike betrays Shisonka because she rejects the non-sexist future offered to her by the revolution that he represents.<sup>60</sup> To designate Nanike as "bourgeois" is not an altogether fair description: while having a new baby in her arms she cannot be certain that this one will live, a fear that is acute in the life of a disadvantaged woman with poor access to health care. Her act of political betrayal can be read as her way of taking control over at least one thing that threatens her child. She attempts to shelter her precarious family-life from the threat of violence. She disagrees with Shisonka's claim that staying outside the struggle is worse for your children than engaging in it: at least by remaining an outsider her children will more likely have parents that are not dead or in jail.

Gordimer has written the end of the story full of ambiguities that challenge the reader to think about the complexity of the black woman's situation in South Africa. Interpreting this story from a position of a "privileged outsider" such as my own is by no means an easy task.

The story "Blinder" also addresses the living conditions of the black South Africans. This short story (also from the collection *Something Out There*) depicts a black female

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<sup>59</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). In Lemert, Charles. *Social Theory*. Boulder/Oxford: Westview Press, 1999. p. 549.

<sup>60</sup> Driver, Dorothy. "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women" in Smith, 1990. p. 199.

servant called Rose who has been working in the city for a white family for so long she has become like a member of the family. Rose lives in a cottage in the backyard with her lover Ephraim. The family is worried for her because of her drinking problem. Despite the Alcoholics Anonymous programme Rose is taking part in on the initiative of her employer, she still "goes off every two months or so on a week's blinder." (*SOT* p. 81)

The family is aware of their responsibility towards Rose and they feel helpless:

There is nothing to be done about it; the lady of the house--the family, the grown children for whom Rose is the innocence of childhood--can't throw her out on the street. She has nowhere to go. If dismissed, what kind of reference can be given her? One can't perjure oneself on the most important of the three requirements of prospective employers: honesty, industry, sobriety. (*SOT* p. 81)

When Rose's lover dies in a traffic accident, she is the last to hear about it because she is not the one to be informed officially. Ephraim had a wife and children living in the country, in a "homeland". Both Rose and the white family all knew about Ephraim's other family. The white family at least seems to understand this dimension of black life:

[...] it was the usual thing, a young man comes to work in a city, he spends his whole life there away from his home because he has to earn money to send home, and so--the family in the house privately reasoned--his home really is the backyard where his town woman lives? As a socio-political concept the life is a paradigm (the grown child studying social science knows) of the break-up of families as the result of the migratory labour system. (*SOT* p. 83-84)

The lady of the house even feels sorry for her maid because she sees Rose as a victim of a male system of domination: "no wonder she took to drink (yes, the lady of the house had thought of that, privately) made a convenience of by a man who lived on her and sent his earnings to a wife and children." (*SOT* p. 84)

Ephraim's "country-wife" suddenly comes to visit Rose because she has come into town to ask about Ephraim's pension. The family is having dinner when Rose appears in the dining-room with her guest. Their dining-room is taken over by a presence totally alien to them as the rural black woman and her children appear in the door-way. The

strangeness is mediated through the sensory experience of smells that overtake the scent of food on the plates:

Smell of wood-smoke, of blankets and clothes stored on mud floors between mud walls [...] smell of condensed milk, of ashes, of rags saved, of wadded newspapers salvaged, of burning paraffin, of thatch, fowl droppings, leaching red soap, of warm skin and fur, cold earth [...] the presence of strangeness is out of all proportion to the sight of the black country woman and her children, one close beside her, one on her back. (SOT p. 86)

The white family is baffled at the sight of Rose being excited about meeting the other woman and even asking her employers for an advance on her wages to lend money to the other woman for the trip back home. Rose acts as the mediator between the white family and the black woman who have no common language.

Even though Rose is considered to be a member of the family, the family fails to really understand her position. The white lady fails to read the situation of Rose's life correctly by assuming her to be a victim. The black country woman's life is a completely foreign territory to her, but it is not that to Rose. For Rose it is self-evident that she should help the other woman. As a mediator between the black rural life and her white city employers Rose finds a place for agency, at least temporarily.

When asked about her stance to feminism, Gordimer has repeatedly emphasised how in the South African context all loyalties are "cut through by race".<sup>61</sup> This story can be seen as commenting that situation where even the "good" white people are incapable of understanding the real meaning of the socio-political situation to the black population. In her 1979 novel *Burger's Daughter* Gordimer wrote a scene that can be read as her own comment to the possibility of white, middle class feminist finding a common ground with the black women of South Africa. The main protagonist Rosa Burger

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<sup>61</sup> See Lazar in King, 1993. Pp. 213-214.

happens to witness a multiracial women's meeting at a friend's house. The differences between the participants are vast: there are both upper-class white ladies as well as poor black women. Rosa observes the meeting through outsider's eyes and realises how trivial the concerns raised in the meeting are in proportion to the larger context of the inequalities built into the society. The description of the miscommunication in the meeting is poignant to the point of ridiculous as the white women want to promote "courtesy" between the races and the black women ask for hand-me-downs for the orphans and the disabled in their township. While it is clear that the issues underlining the problems voiced in the meeting are caused by politics, the participants avoid the issue of politics altogether: "The black ladies' fear of drawing attention as 'agitators' and the white ladies' determination to have 'nothing to do' with the politics that determined the problems they were talking about, made a warmth that would last until the teacups cooled." (*BD*, p. 203) One white woman even claims that "we don't need to bring politics into the fellowship of women", while it is clear that no fellowship can exist as long as the women continue to talk past each other. In this setting Rosa observes an elderly black woman whose presence undercuts the concerns voiced at the meeting:

And all the time those blacks like the elderly one near me, in her doek<sup>62</sup> with Thursday church badges pinned to it, a piece cut out of her left shoe to ease a bunion, a cardigan smelling of coal-smoke and a shopping bag stuffed with newspaper parcels, listened to no one; were there; offered only their existence, as acknowledgement of speakers, listeners and meaning of the gathering. It was enough. (*BD* pp. 203-204)

The woman is described in a very similar way to the rural woman in "Blinder". These women are a silent presence in the lives of the privileged white women, serving as a reminder of the painful issues they are unable to resolve.

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<sup>62</sup> Afrikaans word for headscarf.

But how does Gordimer justify her own right to speak for the black women? Does she really claim to know what she is writing about? In his extensive study on racism Robert Miles makes the point about the danger of exclusion in thinking that only black people can "know" racism.<sup>63</sup> Nadine Gordimer has herself made a comment about her right to claim knowledge on racism:

[...] how can you say that those of us, as whites, who imposed racism, who lived by racism, don't know about it? We know about it, all right--profoundly. I'd never thought about it in that way before but *of course* we understand racism. You don't have to be the victim; you can also be the perpetrator.<sup>64</sup>

White feminists speaking for "third world women" have notoriously been criticised by Chandra Talpade Mohanty. She opposes the tendency of "western" feminist scholars to constitute "third world women" as a unified group with a shared experience of oppression everywhere and describes the effect of such classifications as "colonising". As Mohanty points out, there can be "no apolitical scholarship."<sup>65</sup> Nadine Gordimer has always acknowledged that there can be no apolitical fiction, though she has formally denounced being a political, or indeed a feminist writer. Indeed it is through Gordimer's commitment to writing **in** Africa that justifies her writing about Africans. Gordimer is not writing from across a distance in Europe or America, she lives in the country where anyone who keeps her eyes open cannot stay oblivious to the plight of the black majority.

## 5.2 "Amnesty"

The era of change in South Africa really began in 1990 when president F.W. de Klerk announced the unbanning of the resistance movements such as the ANC and his

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<sup>63</sup> Miles, 1989. pp. 6-7.

<sup>64</sup> "The Future is Another Country." A conversation with Nadine Gordimer and Stephen Clingman. *Transition*, no. 56 (1992), p. 140.

<sup>65</sup> Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Feminist Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1988) in Chrisman and Williams, 1993. p. 197.

intention to start negotiations for a new social order based on universal suffrage.

The release of Nelson Mandela from 27 years of imprisonment was met with exuberance by the public. The time was full of hope but also uncertainty as the political rivals between different factions disagreed about the future direction of South Africa.

Furthermore, the social problems that the emerging democratic state had to tackle with were enormous: mass unemployment and the flow of people from desperately poor rural areas into the squalid townships around larger cities contributed to horrific levels of violence. The white population was also hit by the changed circumstances as they were no longer secure in the privileges they had previously enjoyed.<sup>66</sup>

"Amnesty" tells a story about the new South Africa from a female perspective. In this story from the collection *Jump and Other Stories* (1991) the narrator is a young black woman whose would-be husband has been imprisoned because of political activity. She has been left behind in her country village as he has gone to work in the city. Her whole family, except for two brothers who have also found employment in the city, labours on a farm "for the Boer" where "the pay is very small, we have two goats, a few cows we're allowed to graze, and a patch of land where my mother can grow vegetables." (*JO* p. 248)<sup>67</sup> She had expected to get married but her fiancé had got involved in politics instead. He explains to her the significance of what he is doing in the trade union: "[...] he told me--just me, not the old ones--that wherever people were fighting against the way we are treated they were doing it for all of us, on the farms as well as the towns, and the unions were with them, making speeches, marching." (*JO*, p.

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<sup>66</sup> Omer-Cooper, J.D. *History of Southern Africa*. London: James Currey, 1994. p. 246

<sup>67</sup> *Jump and Other Stories*. London: Penguin, 1992.

248) He gets arrested and after the trial he is sent to "the Island", meaning Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town, where South Africa's political prisoners were held.

The thought of the man imprisoned on the island makes the woman realise how alien the world of her fiancé is to her:

But I have never seen the sea except to colour it in blue at school, and I couldn't imagine a piece of earth surrounded by it. [...] He had told me how the glass walls showed the pavement trees and the other buildings in the street and the colours of the cars and the clouds as the crane lifted him on a platform higher and higher through the sky to work at the top of a building. (*JO* p. 249)

She only knows about life outside the farm through the stories she has heard from him and the little she has learnt at school. After the man has been in prison for two years, his parents and the young woman have saved enough money for a trip to Cape Town to visit him. The visit fails because they have not applied for a visitation permit in advance.

The young woman scolds herself for her ignorance of not having known about the permit needed, and she understands the need for change: "[...] we on the farms don't know about these things. It was as he said; our ignorance is the way we are kept down, this ignorance must go." (*JO* p. 251)

After five years in prison, the man is suddenly released. His comrades visit him at the farm. The woman's mother seems to have a special place in the hearts of the men: "They like her beer, they talk about our culture and there's one of them who makes a point of putting his arm around my mother, calling her the mama of all of them, the mama of Africa." (*JO* p. 255) The young woman likes to listen to the men talking about politics although she does not take part in the discussion herself.

Nira Yuval-Davis' analysis of gender and nation makes the point about the ambivalence of women's role in the building of a community: "Women often symbolize the collectivity unity, honour, and the *raison d'être* of specific national and ethnic projects [...] however, they are often excluded from the collective 'we' of the body politic,

and retain an object rather than a subject position".<sup>68</sup> The mother that the men call "Mama of Africa" is clearly given symbolic status. The young woman of the story is clearly not admitted into a subject position in the political sphere, yet she is given the role of contributing to the future of the national project. When she tells the man that she is pregnant, he claims that this child will belong "to a new country." (*JO* p. 256)

At the end of the story the man spends even more time away from the farm, away from the young woman. She spends time in solitude up on a hill looking at the scenery beneath her and the clouds in the sky like she used to do while he was in prison. "I'm sitting here where I came often when he was on the Island. I came to get away from the others, to wait by myself." (*JO* p. 257) She is left with a sense of disappointment at his release from prison as he continues to dedicate himself to the political cause instead of his family. The young woman, herself excluded from the world outside her home farm, feels unsure about her place in the world. She is left waiting for the unknown future, she waits for a sense of belonging: "[...] I'm waiting. Waiting for him to come back. Waiting. I'm waiting to come back home." (*JO* p. 257)

In her novel *My Son's Story* (1990) Gordimer had presented a more optimistic view of black women's agency in the political sphere. The novel tells the story of a middle-class black family through the eyes of the family son. His mother and sister become underground activists in the liberation movement and go abroad to a training camp. The difference between these two women and the young woman in "Amnesty" is nevertheless embedded in class. For a poor, rural woman, the possibility of political agency is effectively hindered by her inability to move about in the world because of the material deprivation in her life.

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<sup>68</sup> Yuval-Davis, 1997. p. 47

## 6. The Legacies of Colonialism: "The Mission Statement"

In this chapter I will examine a lengthy story (sixty pages) from Nadine Gordimer's most recent collection of stories, *Loot* (2003). The main character of the story is the English woman Roberta Blayne, an employee of an international aid agency, who is appointed to work in Africa in a country recovering from civil war. The specific country is, like in many of Gordimer's other stories, left unnamed. For Roberta, being in Africa is a kind of "return" to Africa, since she is faced with the history of her own family as colonialists and the legacy that white colonialism has left for Africa. She is also confronted with a history of racism that affects our thinking even today. In this section I will begin to draw some conclusions about the stories that I have been discussing in this thesis. One of my claims is that in the stories there is a recurrent theme of "the sins of the fathers" that the white female characters try to make up for.

Roberta Blayne is "a woman of the world", she has been posted abroad a number of times. Now, in the capacity of assistant to the administrator of development programmes in an unnamed "Agency", she makes her first visit to Africa. The work involves a lot of "entertaining" at official gatherings where the forty-six year old Roberta is known as "the bachelor woman". Among the Africans Roberta "has no particular sense of being white", although she is aware that the Africans might have their reservations toward the whites: "[...] it's easier for the former masters to put aside the masks that hid their humanity than for the former slaves to recognise the faces underneath." (*LO* p. 12)<sup>69</sup>

Roberta forms a friendship with a local man who works for the government. The man, "Deputy-Director in the Department of Land Affairs Gladwell Shadrack

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<sup>69</sup> *Loot and Other Stories*. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Chabruma", is described as dignified and slightly enigmatic. Roberta observes his features, keenly aware that it is difficult to "read" him because of the colour of his skin: "He had the gift of the closed face that blackness, in her experience, enviably makes obscure. The so-called inscrutability of the Chinese was no match. He was very black, no taint of colonial dilution in the blood, there." (*LO* p. 19)

At a visit to a hospital full of children dying of AIDS, Roberta comes face to face with the legacy of colonialism in its most horrific form. She fails to observe the situation as an emotionally detached professional, and feels helpless as she realises her inability to help:

There were visits to rural counselling centres set up in army surplus tents and to an old hospital still known by the name of a deceased English queen, now a hospice--euphemism for the last of the Stations of the disease. [...] [The people deployed by the aid agency] must do what they have to do without the fatality of identification with sufferers. But in this red-brick relic of imperial compassion for its subjects the long-established discipline become natural to her failed; suddenly was not there. She groped for it within herself; the anguish of the bodies on beds and mats entered in its place. [...] Food and clean water (the succour ready to be provided on other tours of duty): useless here. (*LO* pp. 31-32)

After her experience at the hospital Roberta feels shaken and the presence of Gladwell at her house offers her comfort: "[...] here was a reassuring presence seated in physical solidity, affirming her worth, the correctness of the three-piece suit a sign of order [...] in a shaking world." (*LO* p. 35) When Gladwell takes Roberta to visit his house in the country, their relationship deepens and they become lovers. Roberta is aware that a relationship of this kind must be handled discreetly, it is part of the protocol of the Agency. Gladwell has a wife and children. The wife keeps away from public appearances, and she is described as a simple, uneducated woman. Roberta on the other hand is described as an intellectual match to the sophisticated Gladwell.

The intimacy between Roberta and Gladwell makes her eventually reveal a secret to

him: her ancestors had been in the country as colonisers. She has "been here before."

(LO p. 42) Her grandfather had owned the mine that the two had seen on a trip to the countryside. Roberta has been told tales of the old colonial life, tales that she considers to be shameful:

Buffalo Mine. You know, the day I asked, that day. My grandfather owned it and he ran it like a slave plantation. 1920s. He sent a man on foot all the way to that liquor store, still there, you stopped at in town, to fetch a case of whisky for his weekend booze party and the man walked all the way back with a case of whisky bottles on his head. Went on Monday and was back on Friday. Every Monday every Friday. My grandfather made a famous joke of it, my man, what heads they have, thick as a log.-- (LO p. 56)

Roberta is overcome by shame and anger caused by her history, the history of white people in Africa and how that history is still present in the attitudes even of those who claim to be on the side of progress:

What liars we are, coming to these countries as if we hadn't ever been, marvelling at the *primitive*--oh yes it's a dirty condescending racist word don't ever use it but the sense of it's there even in our commendment, our reports, our praise--don't say it, *naïve obtuseness thick-headed*--oh the people's capacity to endure burdens, the *usefulness* of this capacity, sound basis for development [...] (LO p. 56)

Gladwell tells Roberta that she should not blame herself for the crimes of the past. He gives her absolution but she cannot give it to herself.

When Roberta is preparing to leave the country as the tour of duty of the Agency comes to an end, she looks back on her experiences: "Leaving a country where she had been before and where, maybe--she shouldn't indulge herself with the idea--maybe she had made up for the past in some way by her work." (LO p. 59) Roberta sees her work as a way of dealing with the legacy of her family and it is the place for her agency, instead of family life.

Roberta's ideas of herself and Gladwell as fleeting lovers destined to separate are overturned when he announces his intention to marry her. He intends to take her as a second wife, which is an accepted custom in the country, even "part of national pride,

for some." (LO p. 62) This is a situation that Roberta's conviction of respect and understanding for other cultures has not prepared her for. She has completely "misread" Gladwell, she cannot comprehend how such a sophisticated, educated man could adhere to such old customs. She is distressed at having to reject him and is unsure about how to make him understand her position:

She rehearsed to herself in many different, useless ways, how she would have to tell him she couldn't believe he, so completely in charge of himself, a man of the present, free, could want to dredge up into his life some remnant from the past--how could he not have seen that it was offensive, surely to him as to her; how disguise the aversion. (LO p. 65)

The rejection is also necessary because Roberta cannot accept her past, she cannot be free of the burden of racism. She is afraid of reproducing the pattern of racism in her relationship with Gladwell. She feels guilty about the pleasure he has given to her: "her taking from him the release of orgasm, [...] as if the pleasure were not what her blood-line disqualified her to share, illicit, an orgasm stolen from past betrayal of all that makes up human feeling between people." (LO p. 65) At the same time by condemning the practice of polygamy she cannot accept Gladwell's past, either: "he absolved her from her burden of ancestry--it's got nothing to do with you: she was indicting him for his." (LO pp. 65-66)

Frantz Fanon has written about the relationship between black men and white women in his portrayal of colonial mentality in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He claims that behind the desire of the black man to sleep with a white woman is actually the desire to be white, to possess white civilisation.<sup>70</sup> Roberta recognises the barbarity of the white "civilisation" she ought to represent. Because of her guilt, she cannot look past the masks of blackness and whiteness and meet Gladwell as an equal. The vision of

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<sup>70</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markham. London: Pluto Press, 1986. p. 63.

humanity here would, then, be rather pessimistic: the crimes of the past prevent people from connecting today.

The legacy of colonialism presented in this story is two-fold: there is the legacy of colonial exploitation that has contributed to poverty and war in Africa and the more specific personal legacy that has to be dealt with. This need to deal with the personal legacies of colonialism has appeared in some of the other stories that I have discussed in this thesis as well. In "A Soldier's Embrace" the woman feels a special responsibility towards her servant because her father had been a colonial officer. She knows she should offer her servant a chance of a better future but is unable to do it. Joy in "Something Out There" reveals that her grandfather had worked as a magistrate in the service of the white nation. Her way of admitting responsibility for "the sins of the fathers" is to embrace a clean break from the values those fathers adhered to. Roberta in "Mission Statement" manages to make up for the past through her work but fails to do so in her private life. "The Mission Statement" can be read as completing a circle of storytelling. In "The Train from Rhodesia" the young woman on her visit to Africa initially realised the injustice inherent in her privileged position. Here, a woman "returns" to Africa only to realise her own guilt and shame.

The fact that the aid agency Roberta works for has a "mission statement" and that this is chosen as the title of this story can be seen as an ironic comment on the perpetuation of the type of speech that "westerners" used about Africa in the period of high colonisation. The African critic V.Y. Mudimbe has discussed "missionary speech" as having contributed to the "authority of truth" that the west wanted to retain over Africa. This type of speech is the source of missionary doctrine:

This is God's desire for the conversion of the world in terms cultural and socio-political regeneration, economic progress and spiritual salvation. [...] All of the non-Christian cultures have to undergo a process of reduction to, or-in

missionary language-of regeneration in, the norms that the missionary represents.<sup>71</sup>

It takes no great effort to be able to apply Mudimbe's analysis to present-day "development speech". The ideologies of free trade and democracy often claim the western authority of the truth that is delivered to "underdeveloped" or "totalitarian" countries in the world today. Gordimer's portrayal of a western woman who works for a development agency but is unable to develop past her own guilt caused by the past can be seen as a critical comment on the uncritical belief in the power of "progress" to make things better. There are many conflicting personal narratives behind all grand narratives, including the narrative of progress. Similarly, the stories I have discussed in this thesis have shown how the grand narratives of de-colonisation and national liberation in Africa are made out of the smaller, personal narratives of self-knowledge and personal agency.

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<sup>71</sup> Mudimbe, V.Y. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. London: James Curry; Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988. pp. 47-48.

## 7. Conclusion

The female characters in these stories are seen as negotiating their identities from various ethnic and social positions. The effects of racism, poverty, the threat of political violence, apartheid legislation and the legacies of colonialism all influence the personal and political agency that these women are able to achieve. The characters in these stories tackle with a wide range of negative feelings and actions: shame, guilt, helplessness, betrayal, exclusion, denial. The white female characters in these stories become to know something about themselves through their recognition of their failure to read others. They realise the inadequacy of liberal good will towards the “other” and the easily ruptured nature of the momentary unity that is formed on a personal level. Gordimer’s portrayal of black women in these stories is very sensitive to the material and political reality of black women’s lives. The black female characters strive towards agency and self-definition and even achieve it at some points.

The definitions that come from outside and control the position of the black woman in the society, be it apartheid legislation or political exclusion by black men, are the things that hinder these women from realising their potential agency for change. For the white women, the restrictions seem to come from the inside, they are unable to transform their feelings into action and find the right words to speak for themselves.

Gordimer has continued to deal with the impact of the political on the personal throughout many decades. In the stories that I have dealt with in this thesis there does not seem to be a development towards the better in the ability of the characters to free themselves of the burdens of colonialism. Is Gordimer’s portrayal of humanity then wholly pessimistic, are we condemned to perpetuating the crimes of the past?

Gordimer's portrayal of human nature is realistic, not idealistic, and this is something she has acknowledged herself: "I must take my freedom as a writer to show human beings as they are, warts and all. If you don't you're becoming a propagandist."<sup>72</sup> Her women in history are not heroines, but complex individuals influenced by complex historical narratives. It is perhaps impossible to make conclusions about Gordimer's overall vision of humanity through the analysis of such a limited amount of material that I have dealt with in the present thesis. I would therefore welcome a study of Gordimer that would fully acknowledge her writing also in the post-apartheid era.

While doing research on Gordimer, I could not help but notice a lack of critical attention to Gordimer's writing after 1994. It is as if the work of a writer whose main agenda had been to expose the suffering caused by apartheid had become less meaningful at the demolition of that regime. The truth is that the awful legacy of apartheid still influences South Africa today. The staggering rate of violent crime, caused by high rates of unemployment and the continuing growth of the population living in the townships on the outskirts of big cities has contributed to a "a culture of violence" in South Africa. In her 1998 novel *The House Gun* Nadine Gordimer addresses the issue of the culture of violence through showing how the violence spreads to all levels of society. The son of a successful white couple is arrested with charges of murder. He has shot dead one of his room-mates with a gun they had all purchased together for the safety of the house.

The problems that I have encountered in reading Gordimer are the problems that one usually encounters while reading across a cultural divide: how is my interpretation of the text affected by the fact that I have no first-hand knowledge of the culture of production of the text? As someone who has not had to face the kind of political and

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<sup>72</sup> Kenyon, 1989. P. 107.

social conflicts that have been the material of Gordimer's writing in South Africa, how can I correctly interpret the emotions of the characters facing them? Gordimer herself has addressed the question of how her works are read and how they indeed can be read in many different ways from different positions. Here she is talking about her novel *July's People*:

People write their own ending. I'm happy for them to do so. The kind of conclusion that they come to, the individual conclusion among different people, simply follows--in a way very interesting to me--their own political views, their own image of society, their own concept of racism: what is in them that is racist or antiracist. (p. 139)<sup>73</sup>

The ending that I would like to write here, is to quote once more an essay of Gordimer's, this time one with a more hopeful tone than those she wrote during the years of apartheid. Here she is celebrating the end of apartheid in South Africa as being, finally, the end of colonialism. This is at least one positive achievement of the human beings in twentieth century history:

More than three hundred years of the colonization of modern times (as distinct from the colonization of antiquity) have come to an end. This is the positive achievement of our twentieth century, in which so much has been negative, so much suffering and destruction has taken place.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> "The Future is Another Country." A conversation with Nadine Gordimer and Stephen Clingman. *Transition*, no. 56 (1992), p. 139.

<sup>74</sup> "That Other World That Was the World" in *Writing and Being*. London/Cambridge: The Harvard University Press, 1995. p. 114.

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