

Nadine Gordimer  
and the Rhetoric  
of Otherness  
in Post-Apartheid  
South Africa



# Nadine Gordimer and the Rhetoric of Otherness in Post-Apartheid South Africa

By

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## FOREWORD

The powerful, revelatory, and evocative writing of Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer has brought a significant contribution to the development of both South African and Commonwealth fiction. Focusing on Nadine Gordimer's novels and on the rhetoric of otherness in post-Apartheid South Africa, Luiza Caraivan explores several issues: the uniqueness of terror in a difficult historical period, the desire to annihilate racial oppression, and, beyond all, the psychological alienation provoked by racism. They are all magnificently illustrated in Gordimer's fiction, and rigorously examined by Luiza Caraivan in the present book.

Moreover, the author of *Nadine Gordimer and the Rhetoric of Otherness in Post-Apartheid South Africa* approaches the difficulties of reconciliation with a violent past, with territorial dislocation, and with the multicultural ideologies of South Africa that provoke intensive epistemological crisis in the lives of the protagonists. The first chapter, *Victims of Memory: Forms of Exile*, is dedicated to the complicated relations between migrants and post-Apartheid society, where black and white, masculine and feminine, urban and rural voices interfere in a discordant dialogue dominated by the dictatorial policy of censorship.

Although there are many studies and various possibilities for approaching the profoundly disturbing questions raised by migration, Luiza Caraivan starts from Edward Said's well-known reflections on exile, as she considers Said to be a classic theoretician in the field. Thus she bases her study on Said's opinion that exile implies a critical distance from the cultural identities of both the colonizer and the colonized, and that detachment from one's place of origin causes infinite dramatic suffering, comforted only by unexpected opportunities for development. Gordimer's fiction allows Luiza Caraivan to give a new interpretation to the problem of exile and to discuss the strategies of a novelist who refuses either to dramatize or to romanticize the pressure of history and politics on South African destinies.

The four categories of people in exile (white immigrants who preserve their mother tongue, culture and memories of the past; emigrants who live in a hostile and alienating exile; migrants who return rich; and pseudo-exiles who feel alienated in their own country) are victims of South African tyranny and totalitarianism, of a world oppressed by cruel forms of dictatorship. Forced to fight against censorship and to oppose subjection

with rebelliousness, they have a loud, resistive and active voice in interrogating the complex relations between colonizers and colonized. As Luiza Caraivan points out by choosing themes related to exile, identity and alterity, Nadine Gordimer has turned South Africa into an example of “generic colonialism”, an eternal model of terror and oppression that escapes concrete history and insinuates itself as a pattern of biblical evil into the ideological and political realm of the entire world.

In the second chapter of Caraivan’s book, *New Otherness: The Arab World*, the author turns to the Arab world and to the interracial love between a white woman and an Arab man as shown in Gordimer’s novel *The Pickup*. Caraivan focuses on new forms of alterity and on the strange identity maps generated by the tension arising between political and private worlds. She successfully outlines the extraordinary literary force noticeable in the way in which Gordimer describes two personal odysseys that are as complex as the history of the two countries inhabited by the protagonists. The Arab man hides in South Africa to avoid deportation, while the South African woman discovers in her husband’s village a mysterious world, significantly different from her own, but equally attractive in its exoticism. The characters’ painstaking search for happiness is triggered by the racial differences inherent in their skin colours, but also by the cultural stereotypes hidden behind the masks that they learn to wear in society. The carnival characteristics of their world are mainly due to the identity mutations of those who rebel against passivity, trying to invalidate stable centers and fight for a world that, in Gordimer’s opinion, can value differences across aesthetic frontiers. It is an area free of all possible constraints that could impede love – political, racial, or linguistic; an area that any writer who has lived the tensions of dictatorship and who is afraid of fundamentalism, xenophobia and discrimination could envision.

In *Black Femininity – The Search for Black Female Identity*, the third chapter of the book, Caraivan examines a new form of “otherness”, that of black femininity as represented in Gordimer’s novel *None to Accompany Me*. On the one hand, Caraivan notices how Gordimer captures the tension between white and black people, between the colonizers and the natives who have always inhabited South African territories; on the other hand, she concentrates on Gordimer’s poetics of reciprocity, similar to that developed by another South African writer, J. M. Coetzee. It is based on the likeness between authors and narrators who repel failure: they do not demolish meanings, but construct them; they do not conceal or minimize convergent voices, but place them in the limelight in order to guide readers’ attention towards them. As a consequence, the author’s personality



is shaped by all the narrators who create knots where stories interweave and raise barriers between real people and paper beings.

The fourth chapter, *The Violence of Transition: "The House Gun"*, reconsiders the idea of historical pressure on various individuals. *The House Gun* is a parable of the post-Apartheid period of transition, where perversions of hidden truths are aggravated by the fight between generations. The history of a couple whose son becomes a criminal is attentively analyzed, while their world of violence, racism, and social alienation stimulates the reader to meditate on all the possible evils of an antagonistic world.

Finally, the last chapter of the book, *The Body at Risk: The Healthy Self and the Unhealthy Other*, focuses on a novel that puts forward a new set of issues related to healthy and diseased bodies, to cancer, radioactivity, and environmental awareness. In *Get a Life*, small South African places are turned into globalized worlds, while corporeal anxieties and phobias help Nadine Gordimer to realize her full potential in describing new forms of alterity, in philosophizing on health and disease, and in offering a challenging reflection on medicine, treatment, or radioactivity.

The ideological and dystopian aspects of Gordimer's fictional world, minutely analyzed in *Nadine Gordimer and the Rhetoric of Otherness in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, help Luiza Caraivan to reveal how the 1991 Nobel Prize laureate has contributed to the epistemological discourses of the post-colonial period and how the writer's ideas, views, and symbols have developed since the beginning of her career. It is not only that the present book answers a multitude of questions raised by Nadine Gordimer's fiction; it also offers an open invitation to study the historical role available to a writer born into such a complex world as the post-Apartheid South African community.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE OTHER WORLD BECAME THE WORLD

“The world of others talked back from what The World was set to make of those others – its own image” (Gordimer 2007, 105). These words from Nadine Gordimer’s last volume of short stories point towards the answer expected by the majority of critics who generally asked, in the early 1990s, when President Frederik Willem de Klerk overtly expressed his intentions to end Apartheid, and when the African National Congress under Nelson Mandela won the elections which meant the beginning of a multiracial democracy for the South African society: “Once Apartheid is abolished entirely, do you think there will still be something for you to write about?” (Clingman 1992, 137)

In a series of lectures delivered in 1994, Gordimer remarks on the changed status of South Africa, which is no longer at the margin of the empire but at its center: “That other world that was the world is no longer the world. My country is the world, whole, a synthesis” (Gordimer, 1996 134). In this regard, post-Apartheid South Africa has been reshaping its national identity in the light of the global events that write universal history, offering citizens the chance to escape the confines of their country and bring in/take out elements that are essential when determining the specific attributes of a community in the process of globalization. In fact, it has the opportunity to extract ingredients from America, Europe and Africa in order “to become that delicious hybrid of West and South” (Temple-Thurston 1999, xi). Western civilizations have attempted to impose their own standards and requirements on this “jagged end of a continent” (Gordimer 1998, 278), which has attracted attention not only due to one of the worst forms of racism in the history of humanity, but also due to four Nobel Prizes for peace and two for literature. Yet, when we read texts by South African writers—either written in English or translated from Afrikaans or one of the African languages—we see that the local and the international are overlapping. The local is more than a first-hand experience of a meaningful community; it is the recovery of a shared space where the Self and the Other come into contact, exchange places, struggle to avoid erasure of differences, to preserve individuality and to

oppose discrimination. In fact, as Michael Chapman underlines, South Africans no longer write “in reaction, back to the centre” (Chapman 2008b, 11). They write taking into account “the rediscovery of the ordinary”, as defined by Njabulo S. Ndebele in 1986 when he noted that “the visible symbols of the overwhelmingly oppressive South African social formation appear to have prompted over the years the development of a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation” (Ndebele 1992, 434).

Thus, replacing Apartheid themes and subject matters in the new South Africa is a demanding task. Some of the literary topics preferred by the “old guard”, the influential “white quartet” (Kellas 2004) formed of J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and Breyten Breytenbach, are: the significance of multiculturalism in post-Apartheid South Africa; the status of the writer; the banalization of violence due to mass-media coverage; reconciliation with the violent past; the implications of economic and cultural globalization; the struggle against illness; HIV/AIDS; sexual liberation; globalization and loss of cultural and national identity; displacement; economic exile and migration—issues that tend to replace older major concerns represented by violence and discrimination on account of race, gender, or wealth, the relationship between literature and politics or the role of ethics in writing. Leon De Kock, who proclaimed the death of South African literature in his essay “Does South African Literature Still Exist? Or: South African Literature is Dead, Long Live South African Literature” (2005, 76), considers that Gordimer has made a “remarkable move outwards, from closely observed turns” of South Africa’s social and historical aspects, manifesting interest in “how issues of national identity are traversed by the surges of global and transnational flows, means and potentialities”.

My aim is to point towards themes that constantly occur in Nadine Gordimer’s writings, to analyze them along with the more recent issues that are addressed in her post-Apartheid narratives. The five chapters are organized around topics and themes which Gordimer regards as prime concerns both in her fiction and in her essays, as the South African writer seems to have created “a major book” throughout her entire career instead of individual “major works” (Ettin 1993, 7). In order to provide “a sense of context” for Gordimer’s novels and short stories, I have chosen to study her fiction and non-fiction together, for they are not “separate entities” but, as Stephen Clingman suggests, “two different modes revolving around a single process” (Gordimer 1988, 13). As a matter of fact, Nadine Gordimer herself emphasizes the fact that writers are the authors of single major works structured according to different moments of their lives. In a

conversation with Andrew Salkey (1969), she declares that

we all write one book, but we write it piecemeal and often from very different points of view throughout our lives. You move on, you change, and your writing changes with this advancement. Or sometimes you regress and the writing appears to go back too. But in the end, for a writer, your work is your life and it's a totality. (Bazin 1990, 44)

The majority of the topics and issues studied are no longer identified as belonging exclusively to the South African reality. Thus, *None to Accompany Me* (1994) and *The House Gun* (1998) accentuate that violence is primarily a heritage of Apartheid South Africa, and it must be related to individual and social responsibility to end it; *The Pickup* (2001) focuses on the oriental adventures of a young white South African woman who chooses to relocate to an Arab country; *Get a Life* (2005) explores the diseased body and life choices. A central preoccupation of this study is with the attention paid by Nadine Gordimer to the integration of blacks: Sibongile Maqoma (*None to Accompany Me*), the female politician, Hamilton Motsamai, the lawyer who makes his appearance in two of Gordimer's novels (*The House Gun* and *The Pickup*), Thapelo (*Get a Life*), who is involved in green activism and environmental projects; they are all representative of the new black elite that occupies key positions in the new South Africa. In all her post-Apartheid novels and short stories, the writer maintains her interest in powerful, influential women, either as major or secondary characters: Vera Stark and Sibongile Maqoma (*None to Accompany Me*), Claudia Lindgard (*The House Gun*), Julie Summers (*The Pickup*). Finally, in her 2005 novel, Gordimer brings forward medical and ecological issues instead of her favorite theme—racial politics.

Throughout the chapters, the concepts of “place” and “home” are also analyzed in relation to the topics of exile and relocation, disease and violence. Johannesburg and its suburbs, the townships and the wilderness of the veld are presented as fruitful sites in post-Apartheid fiction in order to study and comprehend city culture and the preservation of the natural environment. Thus, the “eternal nomad”, the ruthless female politician, the prisoner and the patient are attached, but eventually refuse connection, to a specific place in their search for the Self and redefinition of the Other. Furthermore, Gordimer's latest novel turns to popular topics in the western world—ecology and environmentalism—although she has been criticized for remaining silent on South African politics and for attracting attention to issues brought forward by globalization.

In discussing Nadine Gordimer's post-Apartheid works, emergent forms of otherness are addressed in connection with the themes mentioned. I

shall use theories of otherness to define the Self and the Other as a pair rather than an opposition, to determine the alterations imposed by the Self onto the Other and vice versa, and to establish who the Other may be in the novels and short stories analyzed. Thus, the racial Other is accompanied by the cultural, the social, the violent, the vulnerable, the foreign, the native, the exotic or the diseased Other in assembling the image of the post-Apartheid South African society reflected in Nadine Gordimer's writings.

Although the works taken into consideration in the five chapters belong to the post-Apartheid period, I shall make reference to novels, short stories and essays written and published before 1990, as they are of paramount importance in understanding the socio-political factors that have shaped the multicultural and multiracial South Africa of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, I shall refer to the biography written by Ronald Suresh Roberts (published in 2005) which contains Gordimer's thoughts on her characters and her personal correspondence with Edward Said, Susan Sontag, J. M. Coetzee, Allan Paton and many other influential intellectuals. I shall take into account some of the opinions expressed in the biography in order to explain how Gordimer has changed her points of view on certain topics such as disease, seen as taboo, and on feminism.

The first chapter deals with the themes of exile and displacement and identifies the foreign/alien Other in some of Nadine Gordimer's short stories written between 1950 and 1972 and after the year 2000, and in three of her novels: *July's People* (1981), *None to Accompany Me* (1994), and *The Pickup* (2001). The questions of otherness and victimization are analyzed in direct relation to Edward Said's theory of exile and his definitions of different forms of exile. Another aspect that will be examined is the "voice" of the foreign Other. Due to the fact that exiles, refugees and immigrants find it difficult to communicate their messages within their target communities, sometimes the means they use to express themselves include becoming a victim, getting involved in violent acts, or fighting peacefully as political activists.

In her writings, Gordimer connects memory with the social space occupied by exiles, migrants and refugees in order to provide the necessary redefinition of identity that enables them to settle down in their target communities. The images produced by memory are superposed over reality in order to allow exiles to adapt to a new environment. It would otherwise be impossible for a nation with eleven official languages to exist based on past memory alone; that is why national consciousness is transformed by returnees and migrants (alien or foreign Others), who imprint their own traditions on multicultural and multiracial South African

society. Gordimer depicts instances of exiles' lives, naming and determining the identifying characteristics of what Said (1986, 12) calls "a series of portraits without names, without contexts", explaining images that are "largely unexplained, nameless, mute".

The second part of the chapter presents the four categories of exiles, refugees and immigrants portrayed in Nadine Gordimer's fiction. The first category is that of immigrants to South Africa, who consider their host community unstable and fragmented, but will not or cannot return to their homelands.

The second category is that of exiles and emigrants forced out of South Africa, who cannot adapt to their condition as outlanders. Thus, their experiences in their target communities are described as hostile and threatening. They prefer to isolate themselves in their past memories, especially because home is neither here—in South Africa—nor there—in their countries of origin.

Returnees represent the third category and they are responsible for the future of South Africa, as they "bring the burdens and insights of exile" (Gready 1994, 512) back to their country when they repatriate. There is a strong possibility that their "imagined country" coincides—at least geographically—with the description of post-Apartheid South Africa, as they have the opportunity to be part of its transformation.

Finally, the fourth category is represented by pseudo-exiles, South Africans who are forced to find refuge within the borders of their own country. Their world is defined by relocation, loneliness and nostalgia, as their "imagined country" is placed outside the context of reality. Communication is hindered either by their inability to speak the same language or by their incapacity to understand the rules of what they consider the marginal Others and adapt to their world.

The second chapter continues to examine the theme of displacement and the "Self and Other" theme in the context of interracial love. In this regard, Gordimer abandons the traditional opposition of Black versus White and, for the first time, steps out of South Africa and focuses on the Arab world. The novel *The Pickup* (2001) deals with dual movement: relocation into and out of South Africa, to an unnamed Arab country.

The question of otherness poses itself in a more complex way, as blackness is no longer a distinctive feature of the racial Other. Although the Arab man is at first labelled "black or some sort of black" (2001, 41), he is later regarded as "not one of them" (87), not of African descent but with dark skin and hair, yet unable to speak Afrikaans or proper English (or any African language, as a matter of fact) like the rest of the South African citizens. As Homi Bhabha (1997, 82) observes, skin is "the prime

signifier of the body”, the indicator of the Other regarded as “*almost the same but not quite*” (89), and it correlates with the social, racial and cultural identity of both the Self and the Other.

*The Pickup* offers a picture of the new South Africa and its usual problems of race, class and bureaucracy, taken from a local to a global level. The change of setting from post-Apartheid Johannesburg to an Arab country and its villages, deserts and Muslim people is unusual for Gordimer, who used to devote her attention to the specificity of South African society. In addition, the novel depicts an idealistic image of the Other world and its inhabitants, as Julie Summers, the white South African woman who chooses to relocate to her husband’s Arab village, is fascinated by the traditional values of the Arab family and by the immensity of the desert. The plot reminds one of the 1991 short story, “Some Are Born to Sweet Delight” (belonging to the volume *Jump*), which also presents a love story between an Arab man and a South African woman and her decision to visit her husband’s homeland. In this short story, the man uses his wife to activate a bomb on a plane, whereas the novel makes no reference to the violent side of the Arab world. In fact, the Arab country can be described as the new South Africa’s cultural Other.

As well as the racial and cultural Other, my analysis of the novel identifies and defines the social Other and the exotic Other. The former is a product of a colonized society, the result of a social reality “which is at once an Other and yet entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabha 1997, 71), whereas the latter is the Arab man, with his identity that shifts between a disguised “grease-monkey” (Gordimer 2001, 92) without a name and an oriental prince.

Thus, *The Pickup* portrays a world of fragmented and “unfixed identities” (Dimitriu Șora 2006, 167), an asymmetrical world of “skewed power relations” (169) in a post-Apartheid South Africa that has to redefine its identity in order to enter the “global village”. The intercultural marriage is Gordimer’s “silver lining” for the post-colonial world, just as interracial marriages were for the colonial period. In this regard, Nadine Gordimer undermines stereotypical distinctions and the opposition Orient/Occident is reversed. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, South Africa is defined by political renewal, liberalism, and economic progress, and thus it is associated with Occidental images, South Africans being described as “European—but they don’t call themselves that [...]” (Gordimer 2001, 94).

The third chapter focuses mainly on black South African women and their evolution from the tradition of African villages towards the modernity of townships and cities, and on the racial Other. My



interpretation of the novel *None to Accompany Me* (1994) takes into consideration Nadine Gordimer's points of view on femininity and on the empowerment of blacks expressed in her essays from *The Essential Gesture* (1988) and *Living in Hope and History* (1999). The parallel drawn between the two main female characters from *None to Accompany Me* starts with the fact that they are ruthless, powerful and solitary, and accentuates the black woman's struggle to obtain what the white woman has always had: a home and a respected position within her community. As Ileana Șora Dimitriu underlines, Vera Stark represents the end of "the grand narrative of Apartheid", and I would go further and state that Sibongile (Sally) Maqoma announces the beginning of a new stage for South African writing in general, and for Gordimer's novels in particular. As the white woman feels liberated from the burden of politics, the black woman takes over, her responsibilities no longer limited to preserving the traditional family values.

In some of her essays published before 1990, Nadine Gordimer does not see women's rights as a separate problem but "part of the whole question of human rights and disaffected groups in various societies" (1990, 154), and she emphasizes the fact that black women and black men need to be concerned primarily with their status as racial Others and secondarily with women regaining their female identity. Nevertheless, Gordimer's feminine characters are independent and strengthen their positions in the power structure. As Ronald Suresh Roberts observes (2005, 23), "Gordimer can hardly be called anti-feminist. Her novels are almost uniformly driven by central and assertive women". Many of Gordimer's novels have as main protagonists female characters whose development has made some critics state that feminists should recommend the South African writer, especially since she insists "not on women's passivity, but on their responsibilities" (Temple-Thurston 1999, 115).

In *None to Accompany Me*, Nadine Gordimer presents three different perspectives on black femininity. Sibongile is representative of the empowerment of black women as she manages to take the place of a black man (her husband) on the political scene. Her daughter, Mpho, a black teenage girl, is a hybrid between home and exile, South Africa and England. Although Mpho could be the ideal of a cultural merger for the new South Africa, the fact that she cannot speak any African languages transforms her into a cultural Other, whereas both the impossibility of feeling at home and an early pregnancy define her as the social Other. The third black woman in the novel is Oupa's wife, the native Other who remains unnamed, as she stands for the stability of traditional communities.

The last part of the chapter deals with the issues of home and establishing residence. For Gordimer, place (as well as home) is not predetermined, but depends on the role assumed by her characters and the choice of action. Thus, Sibongile and Mpho cannot match their definition of “home” to its actual location. The concept of “home” is replaced by that of “accommodation”, in the sense of both lodging/adaptation and reconciliation. However, for the native Other who remains deeply rooted in the African tradition, home has strict coordinates: it is “rather the place you were born to, the faces you first saw around you, and the elements of the situation among your fellow men in which you found yourself and with which you have been struggling, politically, personally or artistically, all your life” (Gordimer 1988, 34). In this respect, I examine Nadine Gordimer’s use of rural and urban space, which redefines the black women’s search for identity.

The fourth chapter investigates the theme of violence in the process of transition from the Apartheid to the post-Apartheid period and the process of reconciliation with the violent past of South African society. Although the chapter is centered on the novel *The House Gun* (1998), instances of violent acts are also identified in the novel *None to Accompany Me*, where Gordimer associates violence with a repetition impossible to break:

People kill each other and the future looks back and asks, What for? We can see, from here, what the end would have been, anyway. And then they turn to kill each other for some other reason whose resolution could have been foreseen. (Gordimer 1995, 305)

My analysis emphasizes the strong relationship between the violent Other and the vulnerable Other—generally the victim, but possibly the perpetrator, as well—and starts from the senseless and excessive outbursts of violence displaying hatred of Otherness in multicultural, multiracial post-Apartheid South Africa, which are described in *None to Accompany Me*. It continues with the “crime of context” and its immediate and long-term consequences, which constitute the plot of *The House Gun*. Furthermore, violence and its effects on the vulnerable Other are studied as a phenomenon of inclusion, as everyone in South Africa has inherited the legacy of Apartheid.

Multiracial societies are more likely to fall victim to conflict than societies with greater ethnic homogeneity, as Frohardt and Temin (2007, 402) warn: “Attention should also be given to content indicators, such as a focus on past atrocities and a history of ethnic hatred; manipulation of myths, stereotypes and identities to ‘dehumanize’; and efforts to discredit alternatives to conflict.” Subsequently, such an “alternative to conflict” is

the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), founded in January 1989 with the primary goal “to use its expertise in building reconciliation, democracy and a human rights culture and in preventing violence in South Africa and in other countries in Africa” (<http://www.csvr.org.za/>). A second important step is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), assembled in 1995. The Commission was considered the most effective way to come to terms with the past and recognize South Africa’s legacy of political violence.

In Nadine Gordimer’s opinion (Paul 1998), the main task of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Amnesty Commission is to reveal “the complexity of human beings, the complexity of their reactions to different pressures on their personal lives and their political and working lives, and the constant shift in their morality”, as “digging up [...] the truth” is both extraordinary and painful. *The House Gun* was written under the influence of tape scripts and the methods used by TRC to obtain the victims’ testimonies. In the novel, Gordimer links stories of ordinary people and history itself in order to present her view of a transitory South Africa, where violence has a complicated form imposed both by the legacy of Apartheid and the process of transition, which has made guns a legitimate way of solving problems.

*The House Gun* records the psychological transformations of a white South African family as they pursue the truth and finally understand the mechanisms of violence. The white couple try to come to terms with their son’s murder in the same way South African society is making an attempt to reconcile with its violent past by putting itself on trial. The influence of mass media on the young population is also examined in the first part of this chapter, as it presents images of death and violence as random acts not connected to the audience. However, the “spectacle of violence” involves all the members of a community, without exception, for it is strongly anchored in ordinary life.

The last part of the fourth chapter looks at the rise of black men and analyzes the character of Hamilton Motsamai, who makes his appearance in two of Gordimer’s novels: *The House Gun* and *The Pickup*. In following the career of the black lawyer, the South African writer shows a genuine interest in the rise of the black elite and in the reversal of power relations that transforms the former elite into the vulnerable Other, as she confesses:

They - white people who in the past regime of racial discrimination had always had black people dependent upon them - would find themselves dependent upon a distinguished black lawyer to defend their son. That was going to be the double thesis of my novel. (Gordimer 2000, 89)

The fifth chapter explores issues of health and disease, with a focus on the fear of contamination and the necessity for isolation. Starting from Robert Crawford's observation (1994, 1350) that "violence is a carrier of disease and a 'germ' contaminating the social body", I draw a parallel between disease and violence as reflected in the novels *Get a Life* and *The House Gun*. The structure of the relationship between the unhealthy/contagious Other and the caregiver, as well as that of the relationship between the professional and personal Self, is also examined in the light of concepts such as fear (of exposure, isolation and genetic modification), vulnerability, solitude and public life, body self-image, nature and survival. Health is the mark of the self, whereas disease—as the mark of outsiders—expresses the otherness of the Self and provides experiences which are thoroughly depicted and analyzed in Gordimer's latest novel as a metaphor of the state of South Africa. However, there is always a latent particle in every healthy body that may become activated, and eventually the healthy Self transforms into an unhealthy Other. On the other hand, the writer has always been preoccupied with images of healthy (beautiful and erotic) bodies, considering physicality and sexuality as significant as political life. Consequently, critics have often described her prose as being "suffused with the sensuous", especially since she declared in an interview that "sensuous experience" made her become a writer in the first place (Ettin 1993, 60). Her interest in the faculties of the human body is clearly expressed in her latest volume of short stories (*Beethoven Was One-sixteenth Black*): a three-part story ("Alternative Endings") deals with love relationships described from the perspective of the five senses: "sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch" (Gordimer 2007, 141).

The last part of this chapter examines nature's otherness. In this regard, "city" and "wilderness" are opposed in the same way that the unhealthy Other opposes the healthy Self: "Civilization goes against nature", remarks one of Gordimer's characters (Gordimer 2005, 168). The healthy Self, represented by wilderness, takes care of the city—the diseased Other—, identifies traumas, fills fissures with healing substances, nurses the city's sick and quarantined patients, and at the same time, it is threatened by the infection transmitted by city dwellers: "The inevitable grace, zest, in being a microcosm of the macrocosm's marvel" (94).

Post-Apartheid literature has manifested its capacity to rewrite and reinvent new identities, new stories that have aroused profound interest and will continue to generate curiosity, defining the individual as part of the collective and mapping new trajectories to explore. Rita Barnard (2007, 4) observes that "despite the fact that two South African writers

have been awarded the Nobel Prize, South African literature is still in some ways an emerging field of inquiry, and one that continues to require redefinition in view of the changed circumstances in the country". One of the several possibilities of formulating reinterpretations of post-Apartheid narratives is with respect to theories of otherness.

Otherness is typically defined by difference, and recently it has been associated predominantly with marginalized individuals; those who are excluded from the dominant group, who are disempowered, silenced, isolated due to various deviations or to social, religious, political and sexual differences. The preoccupation and fascination with the Other can be traced back to the beginning of human history and thought. As Simone de Beauvoir (1998, 161) underlines, "the category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of the Self and the Other. [...] Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought".

Michel de Montaigne's essays (published in 1580) provide another example. In Book II:1, "On the inconstancy of Our Actions", he remarks that the Other is not necessarily the antonym of the self, but also part of what determines or even constitutes the self :

We are entirely made up of bits and pieces, woven together so diversely and so shapelessly that each one of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and our people. (Montaigne 1991, 380)

The concept that the self requires an Other to be complete and to understand itself has been expressed by many philosophers, psychoanalysts, sociologists, anthropologists and writers of all times.

The origins of the word "otherness" (and its ambiguous use) seem to have been introduced at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who was among the first to consider the other a constituent in self-consciousness: "Each uses the other as the means by which it achieves self-consciousness. This initially takes the form of desiring the death of the other" (1998, 521). He accentuates the separateness between self and (an)Other, the alienation created between the two.

The concept is also used extensively in existential philosophy and in psychoanalysis. Jean-Paul Sartre's character Garcin, in the play *Huis clos* (*No Exit*, published in 1944), states that "L'enfer, c'est les Autres" (2000, 95). Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (published in 1949), draws attention to the fact that women have been "othered": "she is defined and

differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (1998, 161). In the 1950s, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan made the distinction between the “Other” and the “other”; the other designates someone who resembles the self, such as the colonized people who are identified as the periphery that is different from the center. The Other is the great Other, in whose gaze the subject gains identity. As Sean Homer (2005, 70) explains, “the lower case other always refers to imaginary others. We treat these others as whole, unified or coherent egos, and as reflections of ourselves. They give us the sense of being complete whole beings”. At the same time, the Self desires the other. In fact, this concept of otherness is the one used by post-colonial theories. On the other hand, there is the Other (capital O), which is the “symbolic order, it is the foreign language that we are born into and must learn to speak if we are to articulate our own desire” (70). Thus, otherness can be understood both on a psychological level and on a social level, as the binary self/other organizes every individual existence.

In the 1990s, the Lithuanian-French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas also argued that the Self cannot exist without the Other and, furthermore, the value of the Other must exceed the value of the Self:

I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an “I”, precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that make me an individual “I”. So that I become a responsible or ethical “I” to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself - to abdicate my position of centrality – in favour of the vulnerable other. (in Kearney 1995, 192)

When referring to the concepts of Self and Other, Lévinas (2006, 177) also speaks of “uniqueness” in order to express the “otherness of the other. The unique is the other in an eminent way: he doesn’t belong to a genus or doesn’t remain within his genus”. “In ethics, the other’s right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other” (189). Conversely, the Other also requires the Self to redefine its existence.

In 1993, Jean Baudrillard proclaimed the beginning of “an era of production of the Other”. The Other would no longer be killed, devoured, seduced, faced, loved or hated; it would be produced. In any case, “otherness is lacking and, since we cannot experience otherness as destiny, one must produce the other as difference” (2002, 127). Consequently,

we can only remember that seduction lies in not reconciling with the Other

and in salvaging the strangeness of the Other. We must not be reconciled with our own bodies or with our selves. We must not be reconciled with the Other. We must not be reconciled with nature. We must not be reconciled with femininity (and that goes for women too). The secret to a strange attraction lies here. (Baudrillard 2002, 132)

Similarly, Kwame Anthony Appiah (1993, 156-7) worries about a possible “manufacture of otherness” for “those who will not see themselves as Other”. Appiah also signals the dangers of raising awareness about issues of identity and difference,

partly because the rhetoric of alterity has too often meant the evacuation of specificity; partly because too many African intellectuals, captivated by this Western thematic, seek to fashion themselves as the (image of the) Other. We run the risk of ersatz exoticism, like the tourist trinkets in the Gift Shoppes of Lagos and Nairobi. (Appiah 1993, 72)

In order to escape the label of “Other”, Appiah appeals to nativism, that is, viewing nations as “organic communities”, “bound together by [...] the shared norms that are the legacy of tradition, struggling to throw off the shackles of alien modes of life and thought” (72).

Finally, post-colonial theories use the term “otherness” interchangeably with “difference” and “othering” in connection to race (Franz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Abdul JanMohamed), natives (Homi Bhabha), women, multiculturalism and minorities, the politics of identity and representation (Edward Said), and when interrogating alterity (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sara Suleri), to name a few of the post-colonial theorists and critics whose theories and comments will be related to Nadine Gordimer’s writings.

The process of othering has also been employed to identify differences and to distance the Self from the Other, which may cause exclusion or marginalization from the group. The result may be the creation of stereotypical images, or multi-generational hatred and violence. Yet, acknowledging otherness has more positive than negative outcomes: national identities are preserved, the “silent” and effaced Other makes claims to speak (women, natives, minorities, deviants, subalterns are able to speak for themselves), reorganizing the world order in radical ways. Michael Chapman (2008, 9) underlines “the value of difference”: “Difference, or *différance* (Derrida 1978), does not confirm division, but transforms ‘othering’ from negative to positive premise”. On the same note, Pia Brînzeu (2008, 25) notes that difference becomes possible when combining “involvement with detachment”, when adapting “the images of otherness to suit self-images, completing the more frequent stereotypes of

the natives with a new set of attitudes brought from abroad". The articulation of otherness is possible

in concordance with social or minority perspectives, with the on-going negotiations that seek to authorize cultural hybridities, with the persistence and/or re-invention of tradition, the restaging of the past, and the consensual or conflictual engagements of cultural difference. (Brnzeu 2008, 25)

According to Abdul R. JanMohamed (1985, 84), "genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions and ideologies of his culture". He maintains that such a negation or "bracketing" is impossible due to the fact that individuals are culturally formed and cannot negate themselves. Although narratives rarely change the way the Other is perceived, they often attract attention to the ones that are ignored, silenced or exploited. Literature is the means to designate the Other, to find the answer to the question of who the Other is nowadays. Ania Loomba (1998, 243) believes that there is an interest in recovering the Other ("recovering subaltern voices") and in reconciling it with the Self because we are "invested in changing power relations". Thus, if subaltern voices are to be heard and listened to, "we need to uncover the multiplicity of narratives that were hidden by the grand narratives, but we still need to think about how the former are woven together" (241).

Post-colonial theory and literature has also searched for answers to questions such as the following: what does the Other mean in these times? Should "Self" and "Other" be viewed, inevitably, as accentuating differences? After identifying the Other, is "comprehension of Otherness" possible or is knowledge of the Other just a form of colonization, of authority, even violence?

The displacement of the Other by the Self in South African history was imposed by the white population in their attempt to build a new nation. The new South Africa witnessed a repositioning of the Self at the moment when eleven languages were officially recognized as national. Thus, multiculturalism and multiracialism become the center of political and literary discourses, replacing the issues of racism and discrimination. A radical displacement and replacement of the concept of race and culture has taken place in South Africa and Nadine Gordimer has marked it on the historic and social map she has outlined in her post-Apartheid novels.

As a result, several critics have noted the fact that Gordimer's post-Apartheid writings abandon the "grand narrative" and turn to the "ordinary", to "normalization". Ileana Dimitriu (2009) notes that "in



detecting a sense of 'postmodern melancholy' in the 'small histories' of Gordimer's post-1990 novels", various critics express their disappointment that the South African writer has concluded her social and political investigations, "has lessened interest in 'the politics of nationhood'", and has manifested interest "in explorations of postmodern multiplicity".

However, the majority of critics appreciate her "technique of meticulous examination of detail" (Wade 1978, 5), the "enduring gift" that is "her ability to catch and intuit the implication of the smallest gesture or nuance and trace its connection to the broader social and public arenas from which it emanates" (Temple-Thurston 1999, xi). Ileana Dimitriu (2009) points out "Gordimer's existentialist-inspired delving into the characters' states of being".

Stephen Clingman (1986, 2) observes that Gordimer faces the impossibility of writing a history of the whole of South African society, and says that this is the reason why she has created works that have "responded to the whole history of her society". Gordimer is a "profoundly" historical writer, mainly because historical relevance gives her work its "consciousness of history". When Gordimer contextualizes South African experiences she uncovers "the radical historicity of South African existence" (1986, 18).

Dominic Head (1994, 63) suggests that her novels and short stories "investigate the public through the private, the political ramifications of personal actions" and that she "insists on the necessity of arriving at the political through the personal" (47).

Susan Pearsall (2000, 98-99) believes that Gordimer's writings avoid "aesthetic banality, defined as the 'fastidiousness'". The critic considers that "the reluctance of certain writers to represent everyday South African life honestly [...] hinges on the artist's desire to remain aloof from the 'daily, grubby, tragic consequences' of life in a deeply troubled society" (98).

David Medalie (1999, 634) points out that Gordimer's preoccupation with the personal "is seen as a reliable index of social development, a divining rod that indicates the subterranean political currents".

I have mentioned a few of the opinions written by critics and commentators over the years, for the present study contributes to perceiving the South African writer not only as being anchored in South African realities, but also as preoccupied with issues that can be encountered on a global level. In her post-Apartheid novels, short stories and essays, she has not detached herself from South African social and political realities; instead she has paid attention to global issues that influence or even generate local patterns and events.

In an interview with Katie Bolick, Nadine Gordimer accentuates the utmost importance that has been attributed to the relationship between global and local events, between the public and the private spheres:

There are so many interesting changes happening, especially in terms of what we used to call the boundaries of the intellect. What recognition of sensibilities long ignored, coming from peoples regarded as “primitive”, pre-intellectual, will be developed? People on the streets, the slums, the backwoods of the world? And on the intimate level, what about this magical term globalization -- are we going to know more by remote control, so to speak, and less and less about ourselves and our immediate companions within touch? (Bolick 2000)

# CHAPTER ONE

## VICTIMS OF MEMORY: FORMS OF EXILE

“Exile” is one of the most frequently encountered topics in literature and the literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is no exception. I have chosen to analyze the forms of exile presented and put into theory by Edward Said in his *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, published in 2000, in connection with some of Nadine Gordimer’s short stories written between 1950 and 1972 and after the year 2000, and three of her novels: *July’s People*, published in 1981, *None to Accompany Me*, published in 1994, and *The Pickup*, published in 2001. Some of the short stories and the novel *July’s People* belong to the Apartheid period in South Africa, whereas the other two novels belong to the post-Apartheid era (the last Apartheid laws were abolished in 1991). The reasons for connecting Said’s theories to Gordimer’s work are: the similarities of the political situations in the Palestinian and South African territories; the conflicts common to multiracial and multilingual societies, and last but not least, the friendship established between the two writers, which has materialized into comments, articles (Said on Gordimer) and a short story (by Nadine Gordimer) where the two of them are the main characters. In one of his last essays, *Thinking Ahead*, Said (2004, 169) points out that “above all we must, as Mandela never tired of saying about *his* struggle, be aware that Palestine is one of the great moral causes of our time”, emphasizing the fact that the two cultures are related in a similar battle. Said’s search for “common ground” among different colonial and post-colonial issues concludes with the remark that Palestine “is exceptional but not removed from history” (Said 2004, 28). South African blacks, Native Americans and Palestinians are all linked by their struggles, as striking similarities can be traced through the history of colonized people. He also states that any comparison should not be made “mechanically”, but rather “creatively”. Thus, his observations, along with Nadine Gordimer’s comments about the situation of South Africans and Palestinians, are not only political and factual, but also imaginative and visionary.

The questions of otherness and victimization will also be analyzed in direct relation to exile, my aim being to establish to what extent exiles and people who choose to remain in their countries despite harsh conditions are victims of the environment or victims of their own behavior. A second point is to identify the *Self* and the *Other* in the pair *migrant/citizen*. Although the terms are often seen as oppositions rather than pairs, it would be implausible to read Nadine Gordimer's writings and separate the Self from the Other and the migrant from the citizen. The former is identified as the foreign Other when they enter the *host community*, and this chapter studies the way the Self is altered by the Other, as well as the changes imposed by the Self onto the Other.

The "voice" of the Other is another aspect examined, due to the fact that exiles and immigrants find it difficult to make themselves heard. The means they use in order to communicate their messages within the *target community* include becoming the victim, getting involved in violent acts, and fighting peacefully as political activists.

Many of Nadine Gordimer's novels and stories are concerned with the devastating effects of Apartheid on the lives of South Africans. The constant tension between isolation in exile and commitment to society, related to the need to be part of the changes that will lead to social justice, can be found in Gordimer's Apartheid and post-Apartheid stories. Unwillingness to accept Apartheid and its laws led to two possible reactions: on the one hand, numbness, indifference and the inability to change them and, on the other, concern, indignation, initiative and rebellion against them. Gordimer's writings are full of characters that are refugees, immigrants, or exiles who assume one of these two positions, yet their status does not always imply that they are victims. The South African writer makes connections between memory and the social space occupied by migrants, who constantly renew their identities in their target communities, who invariably appeal to their past experiences and representations of physical and social space in order to fulfill their physical and psychological needs. Fragments of personal stories are joined together to reveal the history of a multiracial society and draw readers' attention to what Homi Bhabha (2003, 3) called "easily obscured, but highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge – youth, the everyday, nostalgia, new 'ethnicities', new social movements, 'the politics of difference'". History changes according to the meanings determined by these factors, which also influence the narrative, and according to collective memory.

The three terms "refugee", "immigrant" and "exile" sometimes cover

the same meanings: a *refugee* is a person who “goes to shelter from trouble or danger” and seeks “aid or escape especially to a foreign country”. An *immigrant* comes “into a new habitat with the purpose of permanent residence”, being unsatisfied with the conditions of work and/or living provided by his/her own country. An *exile* is anyone “separated from his/her country or home voluntarily or by stress of circumstances” which, in extreme cases, may mean to be “banished from the native land by authoritative decree” (all definitions are adapted from Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language 1994, 500, 712, 1207). Other synonyms for the three terms above are: displaced person, runaway, fugitive, settler, incomer, outsider, newcomer, migrant, outlander, deportee, or expatriate; many of them will be used to describe Gordimer’s characters. Due to the political situation in South Africa, it was not difficult for the writer to observe people being forced into one of the three situations mentioned. *Exile* suggests distance, separation, displacement, homelessness, dispossession and detachment (to use a few of Edward Said’s words) and thus it is the most comprehensive of all the terms mentioned (Ashcroft 2001, 133).

However, regardless of their belonging to one of the above categories, Gordimer’s characters seem to remain suspended in a time of their own, which they perceive not as the moment when their real lives began but as the moment when their ideal lives continue despite their moving out of their familiar land and into an unknown territory. Their memories are triggered by different situations and the writer uses different methods to make them retrieve the past and (re)integrate them in their new environments. The exile/migrant’s memory must be situated within the cultural boundaries of the community and it embodies new dimensions, those of multiculturalism and multiracialism. The images produced by memory are superposed over reality and modify it so that the exile may adapt to the new environment. It is impossible for a nation with eleven official languages to stand on past memory alone, especially as returnees and migrants transform national consciousness and imprint their own traditions on South African society. As Homi Bhabha (2003, 4) notes, the Other “is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously ‘between ourselves’”. Gordimer underlines what needs to be corrected or reinvented within the Self (South Africa and its historical, social, ideological and even political traditions) in order to reconcile with the Other (the returnees or immigrants), who, in turn, is also willing to assume a redefinition. The features assimilated by the Self from the Other and vice versa are used in a cross-racial and cross-cultural interpretation of the

Other in accordance with the Self's needs.

### Edward Said's theory of exile

For Edward Said (2000a, 207), exile means a critical distance from all cultural identities, a restless opposition to all orthodoxies—both those of the colonizer and those of the colonized. Said believes that exile, although painful, is also a morally valuable condition. Exile is sometimes a condition of the mind, shared by all those who oppose the comfort of their daily lives, even when they live in the nation of their birth.

In some of his earlier essays, Said describes the exile's life: it requires detaching oneself from all belonging and love of place. Although his essays in *After the Last Sky* (1986) are descriptions of Palestinian lives, they may be widely applied to exiles from all cultures and nations in a theory of exile.

As Said (1986, 20-21) indicates, on the one hand, exile creates “new opportunities,” and, on the other, it is profoundly alienating. Without continuity of place, exiles, refugees and immigrants experience no continuity of identity. Their lives are “scattered, discontinuous, marked by the artificial and imposed arrangements of interrupted or confined space, by the dislocations and unsynchronized rhythms of disturbed time, [...] where no straight line leads from home to birthplace to school to maturity, all events are accidents, all progress is a digression, all residence is exile”. De-centered and out of place, a Palestinian's life becomes one of travel without a fixed destination: “our truest reality is expressed in the way we cross over from one place to another. We are migrants and perhaps hybrids in, but not of, any situation in which we find ourselves. This is the deepest continuity of our lives as a nation in exile and constantly on the move” (Said 1986, 164). Rupture of continuity is the fate of the defeated, while the conquerors, the powerful, remain in place: “Continuity for *them*, the dominant population” as opposed to “discontinuity for us, the dispossessed and dispersed” (20). Said's emphasis on the Palestinians' “privilege of obduracy”, their steadfastness, the declaration that “[h]ere we are, unmoved by your power, proceeding with our lives and with future generations” (68), is a way of desperately trying to find balance in the transit of exile, so that the loss of center does not transform into dissolution. To find balance implies entering “a world where there is an infinite number of centers” in order to save oneself (Brinzeu 1997, 148).

In *Reflections on Exile*, Said (2000a, 175) demands that the reality of life in the refugee camp should be given priority over the literature produced by such exiles as James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov in any