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Nadine Gordimer's Fictional Selves: Can a White Woman Be 'At Home' in Black South Africa?

Nancy Topping Bazin

Growing up in South Africa where only 5.6 million people are white out of a population of 37.9 million, Nadine Gordimer became increasingly conscious of her whiteness¹. The colour of her skin instantly signalled 'oppressor' to black South Africans. Her whiteness imposed upon her a social and political identity that she rejected; yet, it was like a face she could not wash off, a mask she could not take off. As she said in a 1978 interview, 'In South Africa one wears one's skin like a uniform. White equals guilt' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:94). She often sought to separate her personal identity from that of her racial group in order to be welcomed rather than be shut out (or even shot) by those for whom whiteness signified 'enemy'. Must she go into exile, or would she eventually feel 'at home' in her native country? Writing helped to clarify her thinking on these matters, because in her fiction she could imagine a variety of probable scenarios in which an array of fictional selves could act out possibilities².

When Gordimer says, 'I think that all novelists are in effect writing one book' (Bazin 1995:582), she can be seen as recognising her own persistent quest through fiction to find meaningful and relevant ways to feel 'at home' in black Africa. Her novels explore answers to the question she posed in a 1959 essay

¹ For studies of 'whiteness', see Daniels, Dyer, Fine, Fredrickson, and Keating. See also, issue 73 of *Transition: An International Review* 7,1, which is devoted to the concept of 'whiteness'.

² Gordimer critics such as Clingman (1986), Cooke (1985), Ettin (1992), Newman (1988), Pettersson (1995), and Wade have noted autobiographical details that appear in Gordimer's work. My approach compares facts and fiction to demonstrate not parallels with Gordimer's historic self but protagonists as projections of possible selves. The flexible term 'life writing' (Kadar 1992:4,10; Jelinek 1986:188-89) rather than 'autobiography' (Myers 1988:192) fits what Gordimer does. Her personal drama forms the core of her fiction.

entitled, 'Where Do Whites Fit In?' Although she acknowledges only *The Lying Days* (1953) as autobiographical, all of her novels have an autobiographical thrust behind them. Therefore, despite the appearance of social realism, Nadine Gordimer's novels are more psychologically revealing than previously noted³. Gordimer's first novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), is autobiographical in a traditional sense, but her other novels require an expanded definition of autobiographical fiction. Existing theory does not and perhaps cannot (for lack of sufficient examples) embrace gracefully her special approach to life narrative as projection of imagined selves into a probable future. In many ways, her fantasy selves have a kinship not just with the genre of autobiography but also with the genre of science fiction. Just as science fiction writers imagine alternatives to societies and peoples as they exist, Gordimer imagines a variety of lives for herself in order to appraise which ones would enable her to live harmoniously in post-revolutionary South Africa. Survival is a very personal and powerful incentive for her exploration—through autobiographical fantasies—of how to 'fit in'. Only occasionally do Gordimer's books reveal details of her life or facets of her personality, but frequently they focus on ways for a white woman to survive in a black-majority nation.

The prominence in Gordimer's writing of her desire to belong suggests that it extends deep into her psyche. In interviews, she recalls with bitterness how her mother withdrew her from school, because she had a 'rapid heartbeat' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:131). Since this 'heart ailment' was not a serious malady, Gordimer asserts that it 'should have been ignored' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:301,132). However, her mother was 'unhappily married' and, therefore, overly possessive of 'delicate' Nadine and unconsciously attracted to the doctor (Bazin & Seymour 1990:132). After Nadine's removal from her schoolmates at age eleven, she was tutored for three hours a day until she was 'fifteen or sixteen' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:133). As a result, Gordimer spent these years almost entirely 'with older people'—her mother's friends. She told interviewer Janikka Hurwitt: 'I got to the stage where I could ... hardly talk to other children. I was a little old woman' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:133). Gordimer remembers this experience as excruciatingly lonely—'a terrible thing to do to a child' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:133). As her notebook of book reviews, written at age fifteen, reveals (Gordimer Manuscripts Box 4, Folder 21), her intellectual ability was so far beyond the average young person's

³ Carolyn Heilbrun found that dependence on male approval dominates the way many women present their autobiographical selves. For examples of the need for black male approval in Gordimer's novels, see Bazin (1993:31-40; 1995:147f; 2000). In women's autobiographies, Spacks (1980), Mason (1980), Heilbrun (1988), and Conway (1999) observed that many women allowed themselves to seek power not for themselves but for another's cause.

that she would have been somewhat isolated anyway. She acknowledged that in her hometown of Springs, Transvaal, she had to conceal 'the activities of the mind and imagination' for they would be 'suspect' (Gordimer 1987:11). But, as a teenager, she discovered that her femininity was the means by which she could relate to her peers. She explained:

My only genuine and innocent connection with the social life of the town ... was through my femaleness. As an adolescent, at least I felt and followed sexual attraction in common with others; that was a form of communion I could share. Rapunzel's hair is the right metaphor for this femininity: by means of it, I was able to let myself out and live in the body, with others, as well as—alone—in the mind (Gordimer 1987:11).

Later in life she again saw sexuality as a bridge to the 'other'—but this time to those on the other side of the 'colour bar'. Her desire, expressed in her writings, to 'fit in', to feel at home may be rooted in this early experience of isolation. Gordimer was thirty before she could even begin to forgive her mother for what she had done to her. By the time her mother died twenty-three years later, in 1976, they were reconciled (Bazin & Seymour 1990:132)⁴.

As tensions and violence between blacks and whites increased through the years, Gordimer had to decide whether to stay in South Africa or go into exile. As a hybrid—a white of European descent yet born in South Africa—she could not comfortably 'go home' to England or Latvia, her parents' countries of origin. She clarified in an interview why Zambia, which she had considered, could not be the solution:

I discovered I was only a European there, just like any other white person. I took that very hard. At least in South Africa, even if I get my throat cut, I'm an African (Bazin & Seymour 1990:93).

However, even at home she did not fit in. She could not identify politically with the majority of whites, because they supported apartheid. As a radical in support of black-majority rule, she was an outsider even to liberal whites. In short, she rarely enjoyed a sense of belonging; yet she had always longed to be accepted.

⁴ In June 1998, someone who had attended Gordimer's mother's funeral service at the Brakpan crematorium told me Nadine came but left immediately afterwards, not waiting to greet people. Her mother, Nan Gordimer, is still held in high esteem for her role in making the local Red Cross a success. A woman who recalled Nadine as a schoolgirl said she was a bright but difficult child (see Gordimer 1988). Nadine's sister Betty, by contrast, was remembered as a 'normal girl'.

Since she wanted to stay in South Africa, she determined to prove herself worthy of acceptance by the blacks. To those long oppressed under apartheid, her white skin declared her guilty until she could prove she had rid herself of the mentality of colonialism and white supremacy in which she was reared. Through her fiction, I contend that she imagined a variety of scenarios, testing what would work or would not work in various political and historical situations. Her survival was at stake⁵.

Only one of her fictional selves was murdered—an Englishman in *A Guest of Honour* (1970) whose name was Evelyn James Bray. Perhaps making this fictional self male was a way to maintain a certain distance from the possibility of a similar fate. Gordimer described this novel as being about 'someone who tries to justify his presence in Africa beyond the colour of his skin' (Bazin & Seymour 1990:93). Bray is killed by a group of blacks simply because his skin is white. The description of this murder is one of the most moving passages in Gordimer's work, and it reveals how powerfully Gordimer could imagine the situation. Unexpectedly, as Bray is driving along, he finds the road blocked; then suddenly he is surrounded:

They had his legs out of the car and the back of his neck hit the rim of the floor and he was deafened, his voice became a silent scream to him as pain felled him for a moment, but then a brute strength burst up in him and he got to his feet, he was aware of himself staggered [sic] gigantically to his feet among men smaller than he. Then he was below them, he was looking up at them and he saw the faces, he saw the sticks and stones and bits of farm implements, and sun behind. Something fell on him again and again and he knew himself convulsed, going in and out of pitch black, of black nausea, heaving to bend double where the blows were, where the breath had gone, and he thought he rose again, he thought he heard himself screaming, he wanted to speak to them in Gala but he did not know a word, not a word of it, and then something burst in his eyes (Gordimer 1970:492).

Bray and the other protagonists in her fiction represent 'alternative destinies' or 'alternative lives' (Gordimer n.d.:6,8). They are, to some extent, fictional selves⁶.

⁵ In an essay in *The Private Self*, Walker (1988:278) claims that 'a distinguishing characteristic of women's autobiographical writing ... is the variety of roles or poses women adopt in an apparent effort to find one that fits both the self and the public'.

⁶ In their 'Introduction', Brownley and Kimmich (1999: xiii) point out that the 'concept of multiple selves has been a liberating one for many feminist critics because traditional ideas of selfhood go hand in hand with unity, and the notion of a unified, essential self has historically been more appropriate for a man's life than a woman's'. Jill Conway (1999:6) emphasises that we like to read autobiographies—and, I would add, fiction—because 'We like to try on new identities'.

Bray's end could conceivably be her own.

In her interviews, Nadine Gordimer repeatedly refers to the 'one story' each novelist tells. Each novel embodies in a new way the same basic tale. Her core story presents a white protagonist who aspires to shed the colonialist mentality and to become increasingly radical in politics. The first step is to reject the white supremacist politics of parents. When Helen Shaw does so in Gordimer's first novel *The Lying Days*, she becomes isolated and alienated from her childhood 'home'. Nor could this protagonist find complete satisfaction in her home with her white boyfriend. From *The Lying Days* on, the white male in Gordimer's novels typically loses the respect of the white female, because he is increasingly unable to fulfil his role of 'protecting' the white woman, solving the problem at hand, or adjusting to the rapidly changing demands of the revolution in progress. Paul in *The Lying Days* (1953), Tom in *Occasion for Loving* (1963), Mehring in *The Conservationist* (1974), Bam in *July's People* (1981), Joe in *A Sport of Nature* (1987), and Ben in *None to Accompany Me* (1994) are examples of such depictions of the inadequate white male. To survive, therefore, the white woman is left to her own devices (See Bazin 1991:122-23; 2000).

Gordimer's works suggest two ways for the white female to gain acceptance among black South Africans: radical political action and sexual liaisons with black activists. Political action could allay white shame and help the cause. Although Tom in *Occasion for Loving* (1963:287) might think blowing up a power station would make sense, not he but Jessie 'would help someone to do it, perhaps, in time'. In *Burger's Daughter* (1979), Rosa Burger gives up a sensual life with a white man in Paris to return to South Africa where, not surprisingly, like her communist parents before her, she finds herself in jail. In *A Sport of Nature* (1987), Hillela gains the trust of black activists and, in time, becomes a leader. In *None to Accompany Me* (1994), Vera Stark heads efforts to restore land to the blacks.

Sexual attraction also facilitates activism by white women in the movement for a free South Africa. Such attractions may even play a role in the woman saying 'yes' to the danger she will incur. In *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966:94), Liz knows flirtatious black activist Luke Fokase will probably make love to her, because that is all he can offer in exchange for the use of her grandmother's bank account for the cause. In *Occasion for Loving* (1963) Jessie watches with interest Ann's affair with Gideon. Young, English, and more sensual than political, Ann is at first strangely oblivious to and innocent of the racist attitudes that could mar such a relationship. However, the racist individuals she and Gideon encounter make her realise that a permanent relationship with him would be impossible. Similarly sensual and apolitical, the 'sport of nature' Hillela initially assumes the roles of radical and activist only to please and help the black men she loves. Hillela's greatest love is for Whaila, a South African revolutionary. But he is assassinated, and she realises her

dream of a 'rainbow family' is not possible at that moment in history. Hillela does annihilate her whiteness, however, through her one daughter who is as black as her father. Sexuality could erase the black/white dichotomy, but society is not ready for this utopian vision.

Gordimer had two children, one from each of her marriages—a girl and a boy. One of her primary preoccupations in her fiction is with parent—child relationships and a concern that the children have been neglected because of the parents' desires for personal liberation through politics or sex. Max was too busy being political to be a father to Bobo in *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966). In *Burger's Daughter* (1979), parents, who were insensitive to their daughter's feelings, allowed Rosa's heart to be broken while using her to play the role of a girlfriend for political purposes. The parents in *My Son's Story* (1990) neglect their children, Will and Baby, for politics and/or sex. Baby attempts suicide to try to pull her father's attention toward her and away from his mistress, Hannah. Hillela's mother and later her father abandoned her to be with their lovers in *A Sport of Nature* (1987). In Gordimer's 1994 novel, Vera Stark's daughter never forgave her mother for neglecting her during a love affair. Lies and betrayals within the family, parallel those rampant in the world of politics.

Eventually, Gordimer's novels show the coming to power of the black female, dislodging the white female from her place beside the black male in the revolution. In *My Son's Story* (1990:235), when Hannah learns that the wife of Sonny, her 'coloured' lover, has been arrested for revolutionary activities, she ends their affair. Formerly guilty of dismissing Aila as a conventional housewife, Sonny and Hannah are both amazed to learn that Aila had gone on missions across the border to South African rebels in Lusaka (Gordimer 1990:262); she had silently and secretly become a more respected revolutionary than her husband. In *None to Accompany Me* (1994), Sibongile (Gordimer's first fully developed black female character) becomes more respected politically than her black husband. Compromised by past activities, he is being moved out—relegated to writing history—as she is being moved into a prominent position. For white South African females, in 1994, sexuality is no longer a politically correct bridge into the black world. Many black females had earned their place and their due respect and could now be depicted as friends and professionals. Gordimer's black female characters could no longer be restricted to being vague presences in other parts of men's lives.

The right to belong in South Africa seemingly requires that white women leave their white families in order to keep 'moving on'—a favourite Gordimer concept (See for example *My Son's Story* 215). When Helen Shaw recognises that white supremacy is an untenable world-view, she rejects her natal family. When Maureen, the white protagonist in Gordimer's 1981 novel *July's People*, watches her husband, Bam Smales, lose his master bedroom, his credit card, his vehicle, and his

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gun, all symbols of past power, she abandons not only him but also their three small children. Maureen runs for help first to July, who has power in his native village, and then to the black revolutionaries in the descending helicopter (see Bazin 2000). She is more likely to survive as a lone female than she would be as the wife and mother in a white family. This situation is repeated in Gordimer's 1994 novel *None to Accompany Me*. Vera Stark's children are grown, so she does not have to eject them from her house; but she does sell the family home without informing or consulting her children or her husband, Ben. Ben is visiting their son in London; suddenly, he no longer has a home in South Africa. Vera has moved into a small cottage in the backyard of a close black male friend, Zeph Rapulana. In case she needs Zeph's protection, she has a key to his house (Gordimer 1994:323).

The position of the white woman in the backyard dramatises a power shift. In *The Lying Days*, published in 1953, Helen Shaw sought permission for a black university student, Mary Seswayo, to reside for a short time in a small building in her parents' backyard. Such an arrangement was not socially acceptable, so her parents refused. In *None to Accompany Me*, published forty-one years later, the white rather than the black woman lives outside the main house in the yard. The white woman has learned to subordinate herself to the blacks in power. The white, not the black, is marginalised in 1994.

However, the symbolic positioning of the white woman does not mean that she lacks power. To fulfil the author's fantasy, she must find a central place in the new society. Her 1994 character Vera Stark was chosen to help write the new constitution for South Africa. In July 1998, Gordimer was selected as the United Nations Development Programme ambassador for South Africa. How could either one be more trusted or accepted than that?

Nor did Vera Stark have to sleep with a male to receive her honour. Finally, she is happily 'alone'. Indeed, like Maureen, in *July's People* (1981), Vera was obviously convinced that to survive and find her place in black society, she must be unencumbered by a white family. She had to end the split between her private white life and her public black one. Once again, she has crossed the 'colour bar'. Like Hillela in *A Sport of Nature* (1987), she has relinquished her white identity.

In order to be accepted, Gordimer's protagonist has given up her home and family, her white identity, and her sexual life. Gordimer said of Vera Stark in *None to Accompany Me* (1994),

She sees the baggage of her life as something which she took on and wanted and wouldn't have been without, but she doesn't want it dragging around with her forever (Lazar 1997:160).

Gordimer plays down the abandonment of sexuality by saying, 'Vera's getting old, so

maybe she is leaving sexuality behind her' (Bazin 1995:582). Like Rosa Burger, Vera Stark has concluded that the personal life is 'transitory' whereas the political life is 'transcendent'; she has chosen to commit herself to the political (Gordimer 1994:305). Finally, she feels comfortably 'at home', with an appropriate role to play in the creation of equality for all South Africans.

Gordimer reports that her sense of being a hybrid and an outsider has diminished. She has achieved a sense of belonging. In her final Charles Eliot Norton lecture, published in 1995 in *Writing and Being*, she reviewed again her feelings about 'fitting in' as a white in South Africa: before the liberation, 'I was aware that although I could say 'my country'—blacks did not dispute the claim of birthright—I could not say "my people"' (Gordimer 1995:133). She elaborated:

Until every law that set me aside from black people was abolished, until we were all to be born and pursue our lives everywhere in the same right, governed by the free choice of all the people, my place would not know me. No matter how I and others like me conducted ourselves, we were held in the categories of the past. The laws that provided that more money be spent on a white child's education than on a black's, that a white worker be paid more than a black worker, that black people could be transported like livestock to exist where whites decreed—all this had to go.

The exiles had to come back to their rightful home; the prisoners of conscience had to be received on the mainland from Robben Island, and to walk out of Pollsmoor prison; those who had been harried and cast out had to take up the seats of power where their persecutors had ruled so long (Gordimer 1995:133f).

All this 'came to pass' (Gordimer 1995:134) and the miracle happened. South Africa became a postcolonial nation. In Gordimer's words: 'That other world that was the world is no longer the world' (Gordimer 1995:134). England is no longer *the* place to be. Europe is no longer *the* place for a writer to go (see Ashcroft 1989:4). Finally, says Gordimer (1995:134): 'My country is the world, whole, a synthesis. I am no longer a colonial. I may now speak of "my people"'. The freeing of the colonised in turn frees the coloniser.

When Gordimer returned to South Africa after a 1994 trip, she wrote of her place of birth and of her rebirth:

[I] found that the province where the mining town stands, the very region in which I was born, the old apartheid Transvaal, was no longer; was itself reborn, reconstituted, renamed in a transformed South Africa. I had come back to Gauteng; it means 'place of gold'. I was born in that place, but it is

only now that I can feel undivided identity with it, the place where my colour doesn't matter, where I have no rights denied others. Such a place is the only real face of home (Gordimer 1995:36)⁷.

She no longer feels that she walks in the uniform of 'whiteness'. She believes she can put the past behind her, start afresh, and be judged, not solely by the colour of her skin but rather by her actions and commitments. In her fiction, Gordimer had used her imagination to explore a variety of ways (personal gestures, radical politics, interracial sexuality) to transcend the 'colour bar'. She knew that overcoming it would not only free the blacks but would also free herself from all the hated meanings and connotations of 'white' in South Africa.

In 'That Other World That Was the World (1995:115)', Gordimer writes:

I shall never write an autobiography—I'm much too jealous of my privacy, for that⁸—but I begin to think that my experience as a product of this social phenomenon has relevance beyond the personal; it may be a modest part of alternative history if pieced together with the experience of other writers.

Indeed, her life does have relevance beyond the personal, and the essence of it is recorded in her novels. At the core of those books is Gordimer and the principal problem she faced from the late 1940s on: how to survive and truly belong in the land where she was born.

However, Nadine Gordimer's optimism and contentment may be illusory. As she knows, until the harsh poverty of most South African blacks is eliminated, they will not look at her and think 'one of us'. Instead, they will see her as rich and, therefore, privileged. For those who do not know her—and even perhaps for some who do—she may still be a class 'enemy' despite her claim that she has 'no rights denied others' (Gordimer 1995:36; 'The Face of Home'). Her white skin is still a 'sign' reminding most blacks of the continuing gulf between rich whites and poor blacks.

⁷ The reality in Springs, Gordimer's hometown, is quite different from her utopian vision. In my quest to see the old library she had loved and the location of her father's jewellery shop, I suddenly realised, prompted by a stranger, that my husband and I were the only white faces on those downtown streets. I was advised by a man of Indian descent that we were in danger and should leave.

⁸ Mitzi Myers (1988:193) suggests that most women do not feel free to be totally honest in their self-representations. Instead, 'women's discoveries of self take a more circuitous route [than men's]; their self-representations wear camouflage'.

The violent death suffered by Englishman Evelyn James Bray in *A Guest of Honour* (1970) ironically happened after the revolution had ended. Today private ownership of guns (for protection against crime) is common in South Africa. A wall and gates protect Gordimer's home and, like many homeowners, she and her husband have posted the frequently seen sign, 'Armed Response'. The presence of weapons brings the potential for violence into private homes, increasing the possibility that a loved one or friend may either fire the gun or receive the bullet. The person who picks up that gun and fires may be your own son. Suddenly he is a murderer. Then what? This is the subject of Gordimer's 1998 novel, *The House Gun*. In it, she creates one more scenario of what could happen in the life of an upper-class white woman in South Africa. Nadine Gordimer is preparing herself psychologically for living with this form of danger. She is testing how she feels and how she can cope. This novel, like her earlier ones, offers one more possible scenario. It reflects not only the social reality of contemporary South Africa but also the inner life of the author who prepares her continually-evolving 'self' for all eventualities. She eases her fears by confronting them in her fiction.

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