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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG
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STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF APARTHEID

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TITLE: Feminism as "piffling" ? Ambiguities in Nadine Gordimer's short stories.

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Feminism as "piffling"? Ambiguities in Nadine Gordimer's short stories.

Karen Lazar

Nadine Gordimer's portrayals of the "structure and experience" of apartheid are well-known, and have received much critical attention. Less well-known, and less frequently debated by critics and readers, are her views on and fictional responses to gender issues. The aim of this paper is to examine some of Nadine Gordimer's short stories in the light of her multifaceted, uneven and changing attitude to feminism, as she sees it. I also hope to demonstrate precisely how the "structure and experience" of apartheid interconnect with the "structure and experience" of womanhood and sexuality in Gordimer's short fiction. The stories discussed all fall into the 1950-1980 period.

Gordimer has often expressed a lack of support for feminism, and has irritated feminist critics as a result (1). She motivates this attitude by claiming that in South Africa the "experience of apartheid" is so severe in its extent and gravity as to override and perhaps annul the experience of women's oppression. In 1984 she commented: "It's all based on colour, you see...the white man and the white woman have much more in common than the white woman and the black woman...The basis of colour cuts right through the sisterhood or brotherhood of sex...Thus the loyalty to your sex ix secondary to the loyalty to your race. That's why Women's Liberation is, I think, a farce in South Africa. It's a bit ridiculous when you see white girls at the university campaigning for Women's Liberation because they're kicked out of some fraternity-type club...who cares? A black woman has got things to worry about much more serious than these piffling issues. White women have the vote; no black, male or female, has. White women have many more basic rights than black women" (2).

She states this opinion again, even more strongly, in her review of Ruth First and Ann Scott's 1979 biography of Olive Schreiner: "...the fact is that in South Africa, now as then, feminism is regarded by people whose thinking on race, class and colour Schreiner anticipated, as a question of *no relevance to the actual problem of the country*...the woman issue withers in comparison with the issue of the voteless, powerless state of South African blacks, irrespective of sex. It was bizarre then...as now...to regard a campaign for women's rights - black or white - as relevant...Schreiner seems not to have seen that her liberation was a secondary matter within her historical situation" (3; emphasis mine).

Later I will examine three stories, drawn from different decades, which demonstrate Gordimer's contention that possibilities of solidarity and organisation on the basis of gender are "cut right

HWS 242

through" and prevented by the primary effects of racial conflicts. These stories are "Happy Event" from Six Feet of the Country (1956), "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" from Not For Publication (1965) and "Blinder" from Something Out There (1984) (4).

However, in spite of Gordimer's assertion that feminism is "piffling" and that struggles against race (and class) oppression should eclipse it, she has also made statements which seem to suggest some sympathy for feminism. For example, she comments that women are widely regarded as "honorary children" (5), and in an interview in 1982, she said: "Well, speaking for myself as a woman and a citizen, I've become much more radical in my outlook" (6).

The co-existence of these two views suggests that Gordimer herself has undergone a process of politicisation on the question of gender (7). This movement is not a neat, linear progression, however. The statement "as a woman I've become more radical in my outlook" occurs several years *prior* to her firm insistence that feminism is "piffling". This apparent contradiction may derive from a constant rethinking or perhaps inconsistency on the author's part regarding questions of gender, or from a hostility to some streams within feminism but not to others.

In fact, Gordimer's antagonism to feminism as evidenced in the above statements arises from the fact that at that time she saw feminism as a unitary phenomenon, and as a trivial, white middle-class one at that, offering nothing of benefit to black women. Her cynicism is a self-avowed response to a particular brand of feminism that arose in parts of the South African white community in the '70's. The campaigns and goals which Gordimer cites - such as entry into "fraternity-type clubs" - suggests a consonance between this feminism and the very liberalism that Gordimer has often critiqued, particularly in the last decade of her work. Here is one such statement of her critique of liberalism: "The laager of liberalism...favoured change only insofar as allowing blacks into the existing capitalist system of South Africa" (8). Liberal feminism, in similar terms, "seeks complete equality for women within capitalist society", and places emphasis on "formal equality in the civil and political sphere" (9). According to Gordimer's diagnosis, such a feminism results in the rare and insignificant inclusion of black women (10), and hence is not noteworthy as a political phenomenon.

Gordimer has only recently recognised that there are other trends within feminism besides the "marginal" feminism of "professional business women's clubs" (11). She praises, for example, the feminism evident on some (mainly English-speaking) South African campuses in the 'eighties, seeing it as a "harder, more thinking feminism" (12). In her view this feminism is saved from complete irrelevance because "it doesn't see feminism as completely apart.

It sees it as part of the whole issue of human rights, and it understands very well that black women have certain problems that no white female has" (13).

In her distinction between "piffling" and "harder, thinking" feminism", Gordimer, perhaps unwittingly, expresses some support for socialist feminism, the latter being described by Lise Vogel as " [an assertion] that the key oppressions of sex, race and class are interrelated and that the struggles against them must be co-ordinated" (14). Such a feminism would agree with Gordimer that sisterhood is "cut right through" with divisions of race and class, and would share her cautions against easy or automatic assertions of gender commonality. A socialist feminism would depart from Gordimer on two counts, however (15). Firstly, it would argue that sexual oppression is by and large comparable in gravity and extent to other forms of oppression, and where possible, must be fought concurrently with other struggles. Secondly, socialist feminism stresses the "relative autonomy" (16) of sexual oppression, namely that, although it is partially constituted in form and mediated by other types of oppression, it has a distinct and "material" (17) existence that cannot be explained away as a mere facet or ancilliary of other forms of oppression. Gordimer has never, to my knowledge, expressed any cognisance of these aspects of some feminist paradigms. She also appears not to have fully recognised that various feminist streams would share her wariness of crude assertions of sisterhood, and until fairly recently she has treated feminism as a unitary phenomenon. Her infamous labelling of feminism as "piffling" is thus based on only a partial understanding (at the time when she made such statements) of what constitutes "feminism".

In fact, there are moments in her work when Gordimer displays, again perhaps unconsciously, a high degree of sympathy for women and an indignation against their social position. Thus in spite of her several disavowals to the contrary, and in line with her somewhat isolated statement that she has become "more radical" as a woman, there are stories in her anthologies which suggest a sympathy with feminist sentiments. I will examine three such stories: "A Chip of Glass Ruby" from Not for Publication (1965), "The Intruder" from Livingstone's Companions (1972) and "The Termitary" from A Soldier's Embrace (1980). These stories exist side by side with those stories, mentioned on page 1, in which Gordimer is at pains to show how gender issues pale into insignificance besides the larger issues of racial and economic inequity.

In summary, Gordimer's approach to gender questions is highly variable, and her fluctuating sympathy with or antagonism to feminism follow no neat chronological patterns. Needless to say, her views on feminism are not reproduced in neat, one-to-one fashion in her fiction, but some complex near-correlations are discoverable. In some of her stories, both in early and more recent anthologies, the sexual relations of power which she

encodes are *in line with* traditional instances of sexist ideology injurious to women. In other stories, however (also in early and recent anthologies alike), Gordimer's depictions of sexual relationships suggest *distance from* and critique of sexist ideology.

This variation in approach in Gordimer's depictions of sexual questions, makes it difficult to read her stories either as feminist or as anti-feminist representations. This ambiguity of interpretation is heightened by Gordimer's frequent usage of the ironical voice. As a literary mechanism, irony promotes a multiplicity of readings. As Moi puts it: "Politically speaking, the ironist is extremely hard to assail precisely because it is virtually impossible to fix his or her text convincingly. In the ironic discourse, every discourse undercuts itself" (18). Gordimer's tonal slipperiness compounds the interpretive problems caused by the lack of closure and paradigm concerning questions of gender in her work.

The two rough groupings of stories discussed in this paper, illustrate precisely this lack of fixity across her oeuvre. Within single anthologies there are stories in which race is emphatically prefaced over sex, and stories in which sexual oppression is treated sympathetically and as a site of social strife in its own right. I have been highly selective in my choice of stories, Gordimer having written several hundred stories over the past four decades. In choosing to focus on the two rough thematic groupings just mentioned, I have also left out numerous permutations of the juncture between race and sex (and more recently, class) explored in Gordimer's stories over the years. There are also many stories, constituting perhaps a third loose group, in which Gordimer appears to overtly sanction and collude with sexist representations of and attitudes to women. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine these stories. I have done this at great length elsewhere (19). These stories reinforce my thesis that Gordimer's treatment of womanhood is politically erratic throughout her oeuvre. Although interesting, there is also no space here for an analysis of Gordimer's views on her own position as a woman writer, or on whether she sees gender as a determinant in creativity (20).

Within feminist literary criticism there are numerous trends and points of departure, among them a focus on the forms and language which writers employ, a focus on the conditions which women writers face and the various forms of thwarting and censorship, institutional and non-institutional, to which works by women are subjected (Gordimer does not seem to have been overly badgered by such constraints). The construction of female subjectivity through language, the creation of female readerships, are yet other analytical areas. I have primarily used an "Images of Women" approach (21) in which representations are probed for the way in which they propagate or undermine gender subject positions. Gordimer's work lends itself to an Images of Women approach because she writes predominantly in the realist mode, in

which the illusion is fostered that characters, actions and scenarios resemble "possibilities" of people, actions and circumstances in the "real" world. In an Images of Women methodology, an "image" of women may be taken either to express or interrogate the social experience of women - fragmented, contradictory and interpellated as that itself may be. I have not attempted to deconstruct the illusions fostered by realism, nor to decode the narrative and linguistic structures with which Gordimer produces her portrayals. In this respect my paper is a "content analysis" (22) with a view to uncovering the social content, mediated, transformed and partial as it is, which Gordimer's texts encode.

The story "Happy Event" comes from Gordimer's 1956 anthology Six Feet of the Country. The story is an account of a "maid/madam" relationship, detailing in fictional form what Jacklyn Cock discusses in Maids and Madams: white women are the active oppressors of black women in the domestic labour situation, and are freed into leisure or career pursuits through the servitude of black women (23). The story also develops another theme to which Gordimer persistently returns: motherhood. Here, as always in Gordimer, it is treated not in a simple or romantic way, but with the typical twists and distortions to which living in South Africa gives rise. Ella Plaistow belongs to a sub-group of Gordimer characters: suburban whites, "impecunious possessors of good taste" (Six Feet of the Country p.39), with an earnest sense of their own enlightenment. Ella has just had an abortion in a small private clinic, having decided with her husband's agreement, not to have another child. No sooner has she recovered from "that business" than she gets beset by the typical malady of her female social kindred: "servant trouble" (SF p.37). The proximity of the two issues within the narrative suggests that "that business" and "servant trouble" will be inseparable, and indeed there is a close coincidence of circumstance connecting Ella and her maid Lena throughout the story, making their respective positions of power and powerlessness all the more apparent.

On hearing that her maid is sick, Ella visits her in her small back-room, and is struck by the "warm animal smell...the creature air, created by breathing beings" (SF p.37) surrounding Lena. Gordimer's metaphors of fertility confirm what the reader (but not Ella) has guessed: Lena has just given birth. Fear of losing her job forces her to return to work the next day; no period of convalescence for her. The next coincidence binding maid and madam together occurs when Lena's dead baby is found wrapped up in the "cheap blue satin nightgown" Ella had worn for her abortion and then given to Lena. A typical aspect of Gordimer's short story technique is that a seemingly insignificant object gains portent in the story through repeated mention. Gordimer hereby achieves an aspect of the economy and cohesion by which her stories are distinguished. Lena is led away by the police, but not before staring at her employer "suddenly, directly, without a flicker of evasion" (SF p.43). Out of self-defence Ella

soon concurs with the glib public consensus that Lena is a "ghoulish creature...a woman who could kill her own baby" (SF p.45).

Lena's trial is a typical example of how the law in South Africa, far from being the neutral domain it proclaims itself to be, is underpinned by sexist and racist assumptions. The magistrate accepts as evidence from a doctor that one can expect of a "native woman" that she resume "her normal day's work thirty-six hours after a confinement" (SF p.46). Such suppositions are drawn from a stock of racist apocrypha that populate white discourse. Gordimer satirises these suppositions by taking them to absurd extremes: "Hadn't everyone heard of at least one native...who had walked miles to a hospital carrying, Van-Gogh-like, in a piece of newspaper, his own ear - sliced off in a faction fight?" (SF p.46).

The divergence between black and white experience is borne out by the irony within the title. Gordimer's titles are nearly always bivalent: part literal, part metaphorical; part straight-faced, part ironical. Juliet Mitchell comments that patriarchal discourse has spawned a "cult of maternity" (24) which entails a complex mystification of motherhood and birth. The utterance "happy event" stems from precisely this mystique. Ella forestalls the "happy event" by procuring an abortion from a sympathetic doctor. Lena is forced to give birth, and is then faced with a choice of killing her own baby or bringing it into a hostile world where she cannot provide for it. The strain on Lena is augmented by the fact that she takes care of someone else's children: Ella's. Gordimer here demonstrates the view to which she holds nearly thirty years later: potential sisterhood is "cut right through" by race and class. Her story shows how biological commonality is metamorphosed into near-total divergence through the political oppression of the one implied group.

"Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" comes from Gordimer's 1965 anthology Not For Publication. The story is written in a form close to dramatic monologue. Gordimer constructs a first-person narrator who tells her own story and through it reveals her solitude and prejudices. Both the narrator and the "fellow" who briefly enters her life remain unnamed - she as an anonymous menber of the white petty bourgeoisie, he as an outsider and temporary havoc raiser. Ironically, it is the black petrol attendant finally spurned by the two other characters, who is named in full: "Mpanza Makiwane, or Jack for those who cannot say it" (Selected Stories p.277).

The story adumbrates the harsh realities of being an ageing woman, alone in a large city with little money. The narrator works in a petrol station office, lives in a boarding house; her daughter is present only as a "lovely photo...on the built-in fixture round the electric fire" (SS p.281). The narrator's anxiety over her waning looks is given prominence by its placement in the opening paragraph of the story: "I'm forty-nine

but I could be twenty-five except for my face and legs. I've got that very fair skin and my legs have gone mottled, like Roquefort cheese" (SS p.275). The woman's lack of social security expresses itself in her need for a man and her fear of not being attractive enough to catch one. Where "looks" are a form of social valorisation, the loss of physical attractiveness threatens women, particularly older women, with social invisibility (25). Economic insecurity makes the prospect of old age all the more terrifying for the narrator of this story, and her need for a man all the greater. She knows that if a woman's attractiveness is not deemed sufficient, she may have to win her man by looking after him, and it is precisely this situation which arises. The "fellow in the American car" begins to visit her frequently at the garage, and finally leaves his hotel without paying and moves into her room. He remains cagey about his movements, but lets himself into her place at will, eats her food and sleeps in her bed. To keep him, she consents. He remains a shadowy and itinerant figure throughout the story, existing mainly as an incarnation of the exploitation of women.

Gordimer's great skill manifests itself in the slow unfolding of the increasing pain of the woman's situation. This is expressed in the unchanging, flat language of the narrator herself. Formal authorial language never interrupts the particular discourse of this monologue: Gordimer's version of the speech of lower-income whites with its colloquialisms and Afrikaans-English hybridizations. As the story progresses, the woman becomes increasingly aware of the man's unsavoury activities, and simultaneously starts fearing for her own physical safety. The political aspect of her relationship with the "fellow" is here most clearly revealed. The fear of rape or assault is one known by women in every society, no matter what their age or background. Although usually experienced by women in isolation, sexual violence is an enactment of generic power over and control of women by men. The threat of sexual violence is the most extreme facet of the abuse that already exists in the narrator's relationship with the strange man. And yet despite her fear, she longs for the intimacy, brutal and unsatisfactory as it is, that he can give her. The relationship is for her a compound of need and fear, typical constituents of the domestic trap which so many battered women cannot escape.

The narrator's utter alone-ness, in social terms, heightens her fears: "I sometimes wonder what'll happen to me - in some years of course - if 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 p.284). Desperation finally drives her to confide in an unlikely figure: Jack, the "bossboy". The narrator's relationship with him develops parallel to her relationship with the "fellow". Her attitudes to the black petrol attendants are deeply conditioned by ideas of racial superiority. She is careful to maintain her distance from them and demonstrates her racial status by sending Jack on errands "just to show him that he musn't get too free with a white person" (SS.

p.286). So much for the ideological stereotypes which inform her thinking. But immediate experience may sometimes contradict ideology. She finds that she can talk more easily to her black co-workers than to the "ducktails" and "fellows" in her inhospitable city: "I'd sooner talk to the blacks...though I know it sounds a sttrange thing to say" (SS p.276). She finds herself coming to rely on Jack for information about the stranger's appearances, and finally is forced to ask for Jack's protection and alertness. Racial ideology is thus overridden by a second political tension in her life, her nightly fear of the sexual visitor/intruder in her flat. Gordimer sets up a deeply anomalous scenario: a black man defending a white woman against a white man. This is a complete reversal of the customary ideological pattern where white men protect "their" women against black marauders.

Jack becomes father-figure and friend, and finally sends away the "fellow" with the false information that the narrator has left the garage. Jack shows more compassion towards the narrator than anyone else has done, but once she is free of fear, old guards go up again. She reasserts power over Jack through the mode most easily summoned up: racial contempt. Jack, being "boss-boy", is closer to her in class position than the other black attendants. She is an unskilled office bureaucrat, he a supervisor. Over-familiarity with him would threaten her already tenuous social position. Thus tragically, Jack's humaneness is repaid with denigration: "I think he fancies himself quite the educated man...if you take any notice of things like that with them, you begin to give them big ideas about themselves" (SS p.288). In a perverse twist of misallocated blame, Jack loses his particularity in her eyes and becomes one of the "natives" whom a woman on her own "can't trust at night" (p.288). Memories of kindness are shorter-lived than hegemonic perceptions, Gordimer here suggests. Moreover, allegiances made on the basis of protection against sexual oppression, will always be overridden by the stronger drives of racism.

The telegrammatic phraseology of the title evokes the sense that the narrator's world is being appraised from a distance, as in a tourist guide-book. The appraiser could be read as the "fellow" in the story. The air of anonymity and alienation enshrouding the narrator is reinforced by this effect of distantiation. Gordimer could also be suggesting that beneath glib, de-contextualised assessments of South Africa, lies a bitter and converse truth: that (although the climate may be good!) the inhabitants are far from "friendly", and that bonds in South Africa are beset by conflicts and cruelties. Gordimer demonstrates that no relationships are innocent or free of potential for abuse. Victims can turn victimizers, closeness gets overrun by division. The story offers us a segment of South African life, and the bleak, sordid nature of the woman's circumstances is as much part of that segment as are the racial tensions. Gordimer's insistence, in a 1984 dialogue with Susan Sontag, that "private life is penetrated by politics" (26) applies as much to sexual

encounters between individuals as to racial ones. Arguably this story is an expose of sexual powerlessness, but it is also a statement on the inevitable and finally determining strength (according to Gordimer) of racial practices.

We now leap two decades from Not for Publication to Gordimer's most recent anthology of short stories, Something Out There (1984). Stephen Clingman in History from the Inside: The novels of Nadine Gordimer (27), has extensively traced the trajectory of Gordimer's novels in relation to the history contemporaneous with each work. I have elsewhere attempted to trace the historical aspects of Gordimer's short story trajectory (28). I will not attempt here to fill in the two decades between the anthologies in question. Suffice it to say that Gordimer displays acute sensitivity to the nature of each period she is living through, and that each period is somehow manifested and typified, in the Lukacsian sense (29), in the stories and novels written during that period.

In her introduction to Selected Stories Gordimer comments: "[T]here are some stories I have gone on writing, again and again, all my life, not so much because the themes are obsessional but because I found other ways to take hold of them" (30). One of the stories which she reworks in every anthology is the "maid/madam" entanglement. In Something Out There, "Blinder" continues this concern, adding greater complexity and political insight to the earlier stories. The story is written in the present tense, a factor which confers a combined effect of immediacy and continuity on to the story and which suggests that this situation has been in existence for countless years and shows no signs of letting up. The usual maid-madam duo is further complicated by the addition of a third woman character: a rural black woman, wife of the domestic servant's lover. The man is now dead, and the rural wife, made eternally dependent on him by the structure of the migrant labour system, has come to claim his pension. Many of Gordimer's stories sketch the sexual rivalry between two women over one man (31). Here, two women literally share one man, due to force of political circumstance. Yet the differences between the two black women - the urban-rural rift which they embody, their discrepant standards of living, their sexual rivalry - are not enough to override their commonality. The black women share an understanding that Rose (the maid) will never have with her madam in spite of their years of proximity and quasi-intimacy. As Clingman puts it: "...the white mistress discovers to her chagrin an alliance of some sympathy between the two black women...By contrast there seems to be a huge void between the mistress and her servant...Any simple idea of feminism in South Africa is riven by all sorts of contradictions" (32). We are thus returned to Gordimer's contention that any potential for shared experience between women is "cut right through" with features of race and class (33). This story demonstrates fully her warnings against easy assertions of sisterhood. In the invisible triangle that conceptually structures the narrative, the maid mediates confidently and

almost gleefully between the "lady of the house" and the bemused rural woman. The white woman, privileged and comfortable as she is, is cast into a position of temporary marginality while the black women are closely drawn together by racial and economic subordination.

The title "Blinder" reverberates with typical multi-dimensional irony and incorporates the many social complexities of the story. The maid's "blinders", or drinking bouts, are a response to social circumstance and to her insecure position as lover of a man who sends his money to another woman. The rural wife is blind, or figuratively blinded, by dint of her isolation in a bantustan, and her resultant exclusion from her husband's urban life. The title tolls most heavily, however, on the white madam, unnamed and interpretable as an amalgam and type of the many madams we encounter in Gordimer's fiction. The lady of the house is clearly blind to social realities, and blind to her own cocoonedness. South Africa is a society that engenders and thrives on such blindnesses. If, at times, Gordimer's writing has suggested that she herself is "blind" to women's oppression, this story suggests a deepening of her understanding of the multi-sided nature of oppression, and her recognition that gender is a social determinant that plays into other social determinants. Her insistence that gender commonality is "cut right through" by stronger and more primary modes of oppression is partially demonstrated yet again in this story, but also partially diluted. A feminist recuperation of this story would be uncalled for, but so too would a complete dismissal of it in feminist terms.

I have thus far examined various stories which (inter alia) illustrate Gordimer's assertion that gender commonality is "cut right through" by other social divides (and hence that feminism, according to her logic, is irrelevant). I will now move to the second loose family of stories. There are some moments in Gordimer's oeuvre where authorial exposure of and critique of sexual oppression are in fact clear, certainly much clearer and less ambivalent than in the last three stories discussed. Often in these stories there also seems to be a tone of oblique sanction of what Gordimer perceives as female strength and resourcefulness. I am not suggesting that these stories are clearcut feminist tales, but they do merit a subtlety of approach that is not always present in feminist dismissals of her work.

"A Chip of Glass Ruby" comes from the same anthology as "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" (Not For Publication 1965), and provides an interesting counterpoint to that story in the conjuncture of racial and sexual concerns which it explores. This story is an indication of how "the personal" may become political: a woman's socialised concern for those immediately around her, becomes a wider concern for humanity at large.

The main character, Mrs Bamjee, enacts a curious mixture of backward-looking and forward-looking practises. She follows the prescriptions for women under patriarchal Muslim law, that is, to serve the family: "She was not a modern woman who cut her hair and wore short skirts. He had married a good, plain Moslem woman who bore children and stamped her own chillies" (Selected Stories p.272). Yet despite the traditional edict that women should play a background role and never enter the "public" sphere, Mrs Bamjee is also a Congress activist during the era of the Defiance Campaign. Her activities involve mundane but indispensable tasks such as running off thousands of pamphlets on the duplicating machine which is brought into her house. A wise move under the circumstances, for she need not defend herself against accusations that "politics" is removing her from the home.

Mr Bamjee is depicted as a typical product of his male cultural upbringing: spoilt and domestically inept, expecting nothing but servitude from women. He is sullenly aware that his wife transgresses her traditional role, but is not sure in what ways she does so: "his wife was not like other people, in a way he could not put his finger on, except to say what it was not: not scandalous, not punishable" (SS p.267). Somehow Mrs Bamjee manages to be part of a mass political movement and yet also keep within the strictures relegating women to the home. She clearly recognises the oppression uniting the various subjugated racial groups in South Africa, yet simultaneously complies with her own oppression as a woman. She adapts with a degree of genius to what she sees as her two roles, accepting as natural the well-entrenched ideological separation between "public" and "private". She spends her evenings printing pamphlets and sewing for her daughters with equal dedication, and at the very moment of her arrest she remembers to tell her husband to take the children to an engagement party, as family bonds and custom require. The narrative makes concrete the many contradictions which may be constantly lived out by a single social subject.

Gordimer pays as much, perhaps more attention to the characterisation of Mr Bamjee as to his wife. He does not share the latter's concern with the campaigns of the day, conserving his energies for the hard business of making the living which feeds the nine children in his tiny house. A typical feature of patriarchal capitalist societies is that the family may serve as a "safety valve" for work-tensions: "The petty dictatorship which most men exercise over their wives and families enables them to vent their anger and frustration in a way which poses no challenge to the system. The role of the man in the family reinforces aggressive individualism, authoritarianism and a hierarchical view of social relations, values which are fundamental to the perpetuation of capitalism" (34). Mr Bamjee comes home expecting to be the centre of its universe, and is "morose and accusing" (SS p.267) when he comes up against his wife's other interests. When she is taken away, he falls into self-pitying inertia; he still plays no role in the running of the home, and the elder girls - well-trained by their mother for

a future under patriarchy - attend to the domestic tasks. He too is an embodiment of contradictoriness: despite the hardships he has to contend with daily, Gordimer suggests he is by far the more dependent of the married pair.

Even from within prison and in the midst of a hunger strike, Mrs Bamjee is preoccupied by others' needs, and reminds her daughter to wish Mr Bamjee happy returns. It is this little communication which brings home to the latter the facts about his wife. At first he is ungracious and embarrassed, insisting that his wife's memory for birthdays is "woman's nonsense". But he is also deeply struck by his wife's varied capacities: "I don't understand how she can do the things she does when her mind is full of woman's nonsense at the same time". The daughter's answer is Gordimer's key to the story: "Oh, but don't you see? It's because she doesn't want anybody to be left out. It's because she always remembers, remembers everything - people without somewhere to live, hungry kids" (SS p.273). For Mrs Bamjee is fundamentally a nurturer, not only as her family's mainstay but also as her community's "kind lady" (SS p.271). Mrs Bamjee's broader social concern lies on the same continuum of female socialisation as her caring for her spouse and children. Supposedly domestic qualities can, and should be transported into the (tradionally defined) realm of politics, avers Gordimer.

During her prison absence, Mrs Bamjee continues to exert an influence on those who know and love her, this sense resulting from Gordimer's technique of focusing on those who are left behind. Despite the character's disappearance from the immediate setting of the story, in readerly terms she is still the most forceful figure in it, and possesses the full weight of authorial sanction. The story seems to be a tribute on Gordimer's part to the strength and courage exhibited by black women in response to the exigencies of living in South Africa, a strength to which she has frequently paid deference (35). Like the "chip of glass ruby" that Mrs Bamjee had abandoned as "too old-style, even for her" (SS p.265), Gordimer suggests that her character represents something modest and yet strong and precious. She remains at all times "a good plain Moslem woman". In the few physical descriptions of her given, she is cast as asexual: "her body...was scraggy and unimportant as a dress on a peg when it was not host to a child" (SS p.265). Her hard-worn, functional body acts as a metonym for her social position, defined as it is by hard work and motherhood.

If Gordimer is making a case for the strength of women, she does so in a very particular and limited fashion. Mrs Bamjee provokes wonder precisely because she manages to sustain her political commitments in addition to her familial role. Had the story simply been a glance at an overworked and uncomplaining Indian housewife, Mrs Bamjee would probably not have been cast in the heroic terms of the current story. It is noteworthy in itself that Gordimer has exposed the labour and self-sacrifice under which women suffer in the domestic sphere. But this is not her

main focal point. Her stress is on the link between a woman's caretaking function in the nuclear family and the desirability and possibility of channelling this role into political work. However, at this point in her writing, Gordimer does not depict the converse as valid: in other words, that political modes of analysis can be applied to the domestic sphere. There is some suggestion in her more recent work, for example in the novella "Something Out There" from the 1984 anthology of the same name, that she has begun to consider the "private" realm as a site meriting political examination, particularly in her examination of the non-racial, mixed gender guerilla cell (36). But in the 1960's story, Mrs Bamjee's strength lies in her ability to juggle her two roles and manage both, not in any overt challenging of the structure of the home. The private sphere is left ideologically intact, except for a few snipes at Mr Bamjee's flaccid self-pity. It is the "political sphere" that is given added depth by Mrs Bamjee's presence in it.

Arguably, Gordimer's tribute to women triply oppressed by dint of race, class and sex, is a trifle romanticised. Moreover, praising the ingenuity of women within their various sites of relegation, does not make a story "feminist". However, it seems clear that at the very least, Gordimer displays a "women-centred consciousness" (37). Nebulous though this term is (Barbara Cartland may be said to write with a women-centred consciousness), it alerts us to nascent possibilities in Gordimer's writing which may or may not be developed later in her oeuvre, and also defies any simple declarations that Gordimer is an "anti-feminist" writer.

"An Intruder", from the anthology Livingstone's Companions (1972), must belong among Gordimer's most striking stories. One of the author's persistent concerns is to depict the strange and changing bases of power in human relationships. In this story her focus is on the bizarre and grotesque iin a love relationship. The South African setting of the story, although seemingly extrinsic to the central relationship, is not unimplicated in it. The violence and rage expressed in the obscene actions of the "intruder", appear to be on the same continuum of violence as the political system lying behind the paranoia manifest in the many references to "burglar bars" (SS p.386). The story can be read as a fictionalised instance of the "morbid symptoms" which Gordimer, quoting Gramsci, frequently mentions: "The old is dying, the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms" (38).

James, the male figure in this text, belongs to a fast-moving, flashy nightclub set with dubious habits and dubious sources of money. Gordimer's narrative deftly evokes the coterie's insatiable pursuit of gratification as well as its sinister undersides, such as James' fits of drunken forgetfulness. Into this nocturnal world comes the unexpected figure of Marie: a passive, petted, unworldly young woman. Her mother, equally unworldly and silly where her daughter is merely naive, acts as an accomplice in Marie's lack of preparation for the seamy side

of human behaviour. The mother-daughter relationship in the story typifies the transference of oppressive values from mother to daughter as described by Judy Chicago: "In a male-dominated society...women condition their daughters towards behaviour that is 'safe' and unchallenging to male domination" (39). Mrs Clegg acts out her own unmet fantasies through her daughter, simultaneously instilling in her unwarranted expectations of romantic bliss. Mother and suitor conspire against Marie's imminent adulthood, keeping her a "little girl" (SS p.383). Marie's physical delicacy, metonymic of her social innocence, places her in a category of female figures common in Gordimer's stories (40). In interview, Gordimer confirms that the descriptions of these characters' physique is meant to connote "a dramatic contrast between the type and the size of the experience they are going through" (41).

Once married, the couple moves into a cheap dingy flat which Marie assiduously tries to make into a home. James' domain continues to be the "nightclubs and drinking places" where they spend their nights. Marie is constructed as sorely incongruous at these haunts: "She sat looking out of the rest of the noisy party in the nightclub like a bush-baby between trees" (SS p.378). In this flighty and exuberant scenario Marie is clearly the "intruder". However, the highly evocative image of the bush-baby is an immediate signal of vulnerability rather than intrusion. Readerly responses are geared to expect another "intruder".

Waking one day after a deep and unknowing sleep, Marie discovers chaos in the flat. Gordimer spares us no ugliness: "On each of the three divisions of the sofa cushions there was a little pile, an offering. One was a slime of contraceptive jelly with haircombings - hers...the other was toothpaste and razor blades; the third was a mucous of half-rotted vegetable matter" (SS p.385). But the "obscene collage" is not the work of a stranger: "The mess spoke secretly, in the chaos there was a jeering pattern, a logic outside sense that was at the same tiime recognisable" (p.358). At this point, Marie is too bemused for recognition, and it is only after they have moved to a new flat that she questions more rationally how the intruder could have gained entry. When she remembers the locked doors and the ubiquitous burglar bars, the full horror dawns: "...and this time...She began to know what else he would never remember; something so simple that she had missed it" (p.386).

The change in Marie, icon of lost innocence, is entire: "she stood there wan, almost ugly, like some wretched pet monkey shivering in a cold climate" (p.386). The monkey-image returns, but this time it connotes not charming defencelessness but utter wretchedness. The appeal of James' suave "candour" is peeled away, and Marie can only ponder at what savage drives prompted him to distort "the passionate rites of their intimacy" (p.385). The story reverberates beyond its ending into Marie's bleak imaginary future; living a Jekyl-and Hyde existence with the man whose child she is carrying, will she not join the train of women

whom James has left (or who have left him)? Suddenly these female figures can be read from a new perspective. So far we have met them only via James' voice: as "that freckled bitch", as "Bloody-minded Mary", as "those gorgons". Marie, with unexpected acuteness, predicts that when James tires of her he will rename her as "that sugar-tit tart" (SS p.382). All these labels arise from a harsh corner of male discourse, and construct women as hard, brittle and devouring of men. Gordimer's unfolding narrative suggests another way in which "James' women" can be seen: as a sequence of victims of his sordid sexual behaviour. In such a way the story is political: Gordimer builds up a terrifying implied scenario of countless women, all facing private horror and domestic violence, but atomised to the extent that their oppression is perceived as individual. Myths of romantic fulfillment, a discourse attached to the figure of the mother in the text, do nothing to disclose such abuses. Gordimer's little Frankenstein, her character James, is only an extreme incarnation of the "intrusions" on women's safety and peace of mind so highly present in sexist society.

Dorothy Driver offers a different reading of the story. She sees the intruder as Marie's "maddened self" (42) escaping from its repression and expressing rage against James. According to Driver, Gordimer thus offers a "feminist possibility" (43): female indignation will come out through illicit and marginal discourses. In my reading the "maddened self" is not Marie's nocturnal "feminist" self (44), but James' amnesiacal drunken one expressing sub-rational excesses of aggression against women. It is Marie's realisation of these excesses which would then explain her "wan...shivering" state at the end of the story. Although the story disallows closure of interpretation, as the two readings above suggest, it is abundantly clear that Gordimer has attempted to depict an aspect of women's oppression in an instance of particular extremity. James is a more polished and urbane version of the "fellow" in "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants", but both figures are signifiers of sexual exploitativeness. Both women protagonists are characterised by solitude at the end of the respective stories. But seen together, they belong in a family of women characters, spanning her oeuvre, whose sexual vulnerability is made straightforwardly clear by Gordimer, as opposed to her ambivalent, ironical, denigratory and sexist representations of women at other points in her fiction.

One of Gordimer's most moving and vivid stories , in my opinion, is "The Termitary", from her 1980 anthology A Soldier's Embrace. Her capacity for searching out the extraordinary in everyday experience, and her acute sensory attentiveness, are strongly evident in this story. Its early pages are narrated as if seen through a child's eyes, and the richly evoked sights, sounds and smells of the child's world are strongly suggestive of first-hand knowledge. Later, the first-person narrator looks back from an adult perspective upon her mother's life. But the story is not simply an exercise in Proustian nostalgia. As we have seen from the metonymic patterns in other stories, Gordimer has an eye for

symbolism and analogy. Here analogy coalesces around one "memory" in particular, the termite-removal procedure. There are two queens in the story, the termite-queen who is the target of the exterminator's quest, and the mother of the house who presides over the extermination. Filtered through the figure of the child-narrator, the process has a grotesque chivalric aura to it, and the exterminators are akin to a ghastly breed of knights: "Bloodied by their lifelong medieval quest, they were ready to take it up once more: the search for a queen" (SE p.117).

The termite-queen fascinates the narrator because her "endless parturition" (p.116) generates a colony of white ants which are both "subjects" and "progeny" (p.117). The queen/mother convergence gives the ant-queen eerie power. This power is reflected in a spatial metaphor. The termite's underground domain stretches as far as the house's boundaries, thereby making it co-terminous with the domain of the "queen" above the floorboards. Enormous in insect-terms, the scale of the mother's domain conversely implies confinement and limited power. The two queens are tied together by this imagery of domain, and also by the imagery of nourishment. The "sweet creamy stuff" exuded from the termite's body and which feeds her "children-subjects", is a verbal and sensory echo of the "fragrant creamy sweetness" (p.118) of the mother's cake-mixture. These imagistic parallels point to a set of larger parallels. Despite the ant-queen's indispensable role as progenitor and nourisher, paradoxically she is also a subject: blind, immobile, a "tyrannical prisoner" (SE p.119). Similarly the mother of the house is both queen and subject, simultaneously "attractive" and "repulsive" to the children under her rule. She is the centre of energy that holds the house together and yet like the ant-queen, she is "helpless" (p.119). Just as the ant-queen may be eventually eaten by her children, she may be figuratively sapped by hers.

The mother in "The Termitary" is thus a typical embodiment of the duality of power and impotence which women may face in the conventionally defined domestic realm. Her strength and will pervade the story, but the relative meagreness of her power is made clear via the mentions of her husband's daily departures into the world of political and economic power. Looking back from an adult viewpoint, the narrator wonders at the narrowness and paucity of her mother's existence: "Were those events the sum of my mother's life?" (SE p.120). The imagery of queenship in the story points to the concept of bounded domain, which in turn presupposes power held in one area of social interaction but not in others. Questions of exclusion and subjection are thus made highly explicit in this story. The authorial sympathies lie squarely with the mother; Gordimer's frequent tone of cool distance is almost entirely absent in this story. The final image is an especially fond one, the tone almost elegiac: "Now she is dead and although I suppose someone else lives in her house, the secret passages, the inner chamber in which she was our queen and prisoner are sealed up, empty" ((SE p.120).

I have tried to show how Gordimer's stories cannot be neatly accommodated either under a feminist or under an anti-feminist rubric. Although some of her representations incorporate an incontestable movement away from sexist stereotypes and assumptions, there are others, even in her recent work, that still retain an uncritical relationship with sexist ideology. Her statement that she has "become more radical...as a woman" (45) is exhibited in an uneven and non-linear way in her fiction. I have not attempted in this paper to closely examine the historical trajectory of Gordimer's work. Suffice it to say that her stringent dismissals of feminism have given away to a more subtle investigation of such issues, and this movement may well reflect some changing attitudes to women in her society over the years. But this growing subtlety has not precluded her work from sometimes lapsing back into undigested usage of sexist assumptions. No neat chronologies, no perfect political paths can be traced in Gordimer's work: the movement of her stories in relation to feminism is rather a zigzagging and always investigative one.

Notes

1. Gordimer herself is aware of the consternation she has caused to feminists. For instance, she comments in interview that she was "expecting flak" from feminists over the character Hillela in her latest work, A Sport of Nature (1987). See my Masters dissertation, "The personal and the political in some of Nadine Gordimer's short stories", University of the Witwatersrand, 1988, Appendix: "Interview with Nadine Gordimer" p.vii.
For a feminist dismissal of Gordimer (on the grounds that she exhibits a "strong identification with patriarchy"), see Lockett, Cecily "Feminism(s) and Writing in the South African Context", paper given at AUETSA conference in July 1989 in Pretoria, pp.26-28.

2. Boyers, R. et al: "A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer", Salmagundi no.62, Winter 1984, pp.19-20.

3. Gordimer, N. "The Prison-House of Colonialism", Times Literary Supplement, 15 August 1980, p.918.

4. The publication details of the anthologies of short stories by Gordimer referred to in this paper are as follows:

   Face to Face. Johannesburg: Silver Leaf Books, 1949.

   Six Feet of the Country. London: Victor Gollancz, 1956.

   Not For Publication. London: Victor Gollancz, 1965.

   Livingstone's Companions. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972.

   Selected Stories. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.

   A Soldier's Embrace. London: Jonathan Cape, 1980: Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.

   Something Out There. London: Jonathan Cape, 1984; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

   Most of my page references are from the first edition anthologies, but from time to time I take references from Selected Stories (SS) 1975.

5. Gordimer, "What Being a South African Means to Me", South African Outlook, June 1977, p.88.

6. Gray, Stephen. "An Interview with Nadine Gordimer", Contemporary Literature vol.22, no.3, Summer 1981, p.291.

7. For a discussion of this movement, see Dorothy Driver: "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women", English in Africa, vol.10, no.2, pp.34-5. See also my Masters dissertation op.cit. Chapters 4-5.

8. Boyers, R. et.al. op.cit. p.29.

9. Vogel, Lise. Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Towards a Unitary Theory. London: Pluto Press, 1983, p.3.

10. See Appendix to my dissertation op.cit.: "Interview with Nadine Gordimer" pp. iii-iv, for Gordimer's views on "tokenism" and "marginal feminism". Publication of interview forthcoming.

11. ibid.

12. ibid.

13. ibid.

14. Vogel op.cit. p.6.

15. For a full discussion of the definitions of patriarchy and socialist feminism underlying my analysis see my dissertation, Chapter 1, pp.1-6.

16. Althusser, Louis. "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in For Marx, London: New Left Books, 1977, p.111.

17. Althusser, L. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in Essays on Ideology London: Verso, 1976, p.39.

18. Moi, Toril. Sexual/Textual: Feminist Literary Theory. London: Methuen, 1985, p.40.

19. See my thesis Ch. 4-5.

20. ibid. p.122.

21. Moi, T. op.cit. Ch.2, pp.42-9.

22. ibid. p.23.

23. Cock, Jacklyn. Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation. JHB: Ravan, 1980; Chapter 5.

24. Mitchell, Juliet. Women's Estate. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, p.109.

25. See Keysworth, Florence. "Invisible Struggles: The Politics of Ageing" in Brunt, R. and Rowan, C. (eds). Feminism, Culture and Politics. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982, pp.131-3.

26. "Nadine Gordimer and Susan Sontag in Conversation", The Listener, 23 May, 1985, p.16.

27. Clingman, Stephen. The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside. JHB: Ravan, 1986.

28. See my dissertation Chapters 1-5.

29. I am here indebted to Clingman's usage of Lukacs' concept of typicality, condensed by Clingman as follows in relation to characterisation: "For Lukacs, 'types' are not to be confused with stereotypes, nor with the average, nor with the eccentric, but should rather be seen as highly individualised characters who engage in their fullest potential with the social and historical circumstances of their situation". (History from the Inside op.cit. p. 9). The representation of situations and consciousnesses can also be "typical", as expressed by Clingman here: "...the work does not represent 'average' consciousness, nor on the other hand is it eccentric; rather it explores in extreme form the potential and the limits of a general situation" (Review of Something Out There in English Academy Review, no.3, 1985, p.192.

30. Gordimer, N. Selected Stories op.cit p.10.

31. Examples are "the Battlefield at No. 29" from Face to Face, 1948, and "Rain Queen" from Livingstone's Companions, 1972.

32. Clingman, S, review of Something Out There op.cit. p.195.

33. Boyers, R. (et.al.) op.cit. p.19.

34. McAffee, K. and Wood, M. "Bread and Roses" in Leviathan, London: Agitprop, 1969, p.2. Cited in Rowbotham, S. Woman's Consciousness, Man's World Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p.58.

35. Gordimer: "The only candidates [for the title "Woman of the Year"] are surely Winnie Mandela...or any one of the black township women who have walked beside their marching children, carrying water to wash the teargas from their eyes". Cited by Driver op.cit. p.45.

36. See my dissertation pp.199-203, for an analysis of "Something Out There".

37. For a critical discussion of the concept of "women-centredness" see Coward, Rosalind. "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?" in Showalter, E (ed). The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. London: Virago, 1986, p.230. For an application

of the concept to Gordimer's work, see Gardner, Susan. "Still Waiting for the Great Feminist Novel: Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter" in Hecate (Brisbane), vol 8, no.1, 1982, pp.61-76.

38. Gordimer, N. "Living in the Interregnum", New York Review of Books, 20 January 1983, p.21.

39. Chicago, Judith. Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist. London: The Women's Press, 1982, p.139.

40. Two other examples of frail female figures are the central characters in "The Smell of Death and Flowers" and "A Bit Of Young Life" (both from Six Feet of the Country).

41. See my interview with Gordimer, Appendix op.cit. p.x.

42. Driver, D. op.cit. p.44.

43. ibid.

44. ibid.

45. Gordimer, N. in interview with Gray, S. op.cit.