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SEX, THE PICARESQUE AND THE GLAMOROUS REVOLUTION: NADINE GORDIMER'S *A SPORT OF NATURE*

Karen Lazar

Since South Africa's 1994 elections, a number of cultural works have come out which incorporate the build-up to social transformation as their subject matter. Nadine Gordimer's most recent novel to date, *None to Accompany Me* (1994), explores the politics of negotiation which led to South Africa's first democratic election as well as the optimisms and tensions of the years following Nelson Mandela's release from prison. In this most recent novel, Gordimer's commitment to the new social order as led by the African National Congress is both re-articulated and probed. The narrative deals with the daily work of politics and establishes a complex though localised focus on South Africa's recent moment.

In the light of this recent novel by Gordimer, it is interesting to reread an earlier work by the author where a less bounded, more Utopian vision is present. *A Sport of Nature* (1987) offers a grand, energetic journey into an imagined African history as the backdrop against which South Africa's particular trajectory (past and future) may be read. This novel speaks of Gordimer's political imagination at its most unfettered, it spells out the wish that her subsequent novels put into more concrete and localised terms. My concern is to assess Gordimer's political project in *A Sport of Nature* in the light of the apparently "Utopian" versions of female sexuality and identity she here puts forward. Through the central figure of Hillela, especially, aspects of Gordimer's overall vision can be gauged.

A Sport of Nature has provoked a high degree of interpretive divergency. Some critics have hailed it as Gordimer's "most optimistic" novel (Cooper 1990: 68) in the politics it offers, others as her "most deeply cynical" (Krauss 1987: 33). Much critical focus has centred around the primary figure of Hillela, and again, opinion is strikingly divided: is Hillela an inspirational new type of political being, a feminist's nightmare, a modern female picaro, or all/none of these things?

To start with, what is the relationship of *A Sport of Nature* to the classic picaresque form? How does Gordimer make use of a genre which largely excludes women as agents and subjects? Very few texts in the picaresque tradition have had central female agents: *La Picara Justina* and *Moll Flanders* are the prominent classical exceptions. Does Gordimer attempt to augment the genre by offering us a "picara" - a hero who sets in motion a new way of reading the picaresque which makes space for womanhood and femaleness as problematics?

Wenzel argues that *A Sport of Nature* (among other texts) is an example of the "contemporary women's picaresque". She claims that the picaresque form can be used as "a subversive strategy to assert feminist experience and to counter/expose patriarchal and imperialist domination" (1993: 49), and that Gordimer uses the form

for precisely these ends in *A Sport of Nature*. Within these ends, Hillela's arch-opportunism should be hailed as a feminist mode of behaviour:

> She manages to gain political power through her alternate roles of mistress and wife. Her choice of apparent subjugation is in fact a bid for power, the only possibility for a woman forced to obey the rules of a man's game (54).

Playing the rules of a "man's game" to one's own advantage might have the status of a feminist ploy to some readers; to others it might not. Assuming that Hillela is "forced" to obey the rules of this game begs such questions as what the nature of the game is, who sets the rules and what Gordimer's attitudes to the players are. In short, to view the path of Hillela's acts as an uncomplicated feminist path is a mystification of "feminism". Gordimer does make certain decisive mutations within the picaresque genre (both in ideological and formal terms) but her inscription of Hillela in the text is neither simple nor unproblematically "subversive". The sexuality which Hillela encodes is, eventually, a confusing and compromised one, and one which does little more than add a mass of contemporary detail to the position given to women in the classic "male" picaresque: that of sexual object, helpmate and adjunct to male power.

Given the striking resemblance between *A Sport of Nature* and aspects of the traditional picaresque, it is obvious that Gordimer had that form in mind when she wrote the text. This is not to say that the novel is a pure case of the picaresque, or a pure case of anything for that matter: its affinities with the properties of the historiographic novel, with myth, with allegory and with countless other forms make it an exceedingly complex work.[1] While wanting to avoid tedious taxonomies, it is worth mentioning some of the salients which this text absorbs from its picaresque predecessors. Richards points out (1979) that many early critical definitions of the picaresque are so elastic as to bring it absurdly close to the novel in general. His study looks to the initial moment of the picaresque (sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish and other European texts) for its definition and then charts a trajectory from that form through to the "modern" picaresque with its very different kind of narrative and hero in the nineteenth century (Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull* being one such example).

The early picaresque was born in a time of massive social transition, as new mercantile conditions did battle with older feudal ones, and as successful pragmatism and materialism increasingly appeared to be the guarantors of the individual's hopes. According to Richards the "picaresque gesture" often arises when "conditions [are] favourable, in general, to the possibilities of the depiction in literature of individual resistance to social coercion" (25). Written in South Africa in the 1980s when governmental coercion was being enacted upon black township life through one harsh strategy after another and when militarisation, violence and despair were on the rise, it may seem strange that Gordimer chose this genre for *A Sport of Nature*. At this time such largescale authorised violence was occurring, however, precisely because apartheid hegemony was being fundamentally threatened by both spontaneous and organised resistance on a large scale. Community organisations, student groups and trade unions, many of them aligned

under the banner of the Congress-aligned United Democratic Front, grew in strength and were among the forces working for change at this time, as detailed by Sasha's letters from prison towards the end of the novel.

Perhaps in these surges of rebellion growing from the late 70s onwards, Gordimer saw the "picaresque gesture" writ large and appreciated that although coercion seemed indomitable, its dialectical opposite - liberation - would be ushered in eventually through the social processes already underway. In some senses then, "conditions were favourable" for the emergence of a free imaginary being like Hillela: a contemporary, and apparently revolutionary, picaro. Hillela is Gordimer's conduit for a Utopian kind of vision, she is wish-fulfilment rendered concrete. With South Africa's political liberation inevitable but not quite imminent in the mid-80s, a Utopian literary project would be one way of representing conditions that were not yet fully representable. Like Sasha in *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer articulates a strong respect for Utopian visions:

> You have to have a little streak of Utopianism, you have to be idealistic. Without idealism, politics is a very empty thing (interview 1992a: 147).

The picaresque, in particular, is a convenient mode for representing an idealistic futurity whose chief agent is by nature a wanderer. This presents Gordimer with numerous opportunities for laying down insights about wide-ranging types of society and types of history and future. Her long-present interest in South Africa's relation to the African continent and in the nature of contemporary African politics thus finds a suitable form in the picaresque mode.

To return briefly to Gordimer's (chief) antecedent, the classical picaresque. Importantly, for our purposes, the picaro is a contradictory figure. He is no revolutionary. A rank individualist and a violator of norms and hierarchies, yes, and also the signifier of an impulse which was in origin liberating because it entailed a "journey of the bourgeois soul towards possibility, towards a freedom possessed by neither serf nor lord under the old regime" (Bone 1972: 210). But he is also a figure who ultimately admires and yearns for respectability and has the paradoxical ability of achieving it through roguish means. He therefore stands for a bourgeois structure of thought while also seeming to parody its less inviting aspects, such as piety, rigidity and complacency. If Gordimer's title is anything to go by, Hillela too must be seen as a "rogue", a free and admirable deviant up against a range of constraining paradigms. And yet she too ultimately settles for comfort (more than comfort) and exceptional social status. Gordimer is scarcely ironical about the opulent lifestyle pursued by Reuel and Hillela at the end of the novel. Like the picaro, then, Hillela embodies a contradiction - her means are meant to be read as innovative and brazen in the face of authority, but her end turns out to be ultra-respectability: of a contemporary and Africanised kind.

Hillela shares many other traits with the early picaro.[2] He springs from uncertain origins and obscure parentage. Hillela for many years believes that she is the offspring of an adulterous affair between her mother and an unknown man in

Mocambique. The fact that she is effectively an orphan and lives an unusually parentless life also draws her closer to some comic heroines, such as Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. The picaro is born among have-nots, and spends a great deal of his life as a half-outsider. Hillela stems from middle-class, if unstable, origins and thus usually has quite plentiful means available to her. She can be classed as an outsider, however, in view of some of the social and sexual ethics she lives by. The picaro undergoes an early initiation into the ways of the world, and develops a penchant for travelling and for acquiring knowledge of the new geographies he enters and the social contexts that come with them. Hillela's penchant for "moving on" when she has exhausted a situation is almost too obvious for mention. The fact that she is named for her Jewish immigrant grandfather, Hillel, foregrounds a family history already built on mobility and on flights from harsh politics. The picaro revels in playing parts and donning disguises, much like Hillela's capacity for shifting roles and donning different names while remaining substantially "Hillela".

The episodic structure of the picaresque, the fact that the picaro graduates from one distinct "adventure" or scenario to another, and that he is accustomed to outwitting diversity, also have obvious parallels with Gordimer's text. Neither place nor circumstance remains static for long in this novel. In the picaresque the mode of character-presentation is one based on externality: the picaro's subjective and emotional processes are seldom shown. In fact, if the picaro can be said to undergo change (and this is often doubtful), his is the maturation that comes from persistent confrontation with circumstance. He is apprehendable through *action*, not through philosophical or psychic process. Hillela, too, can be gauged through her actions rather than through her interiority. Apart from the periodic sections of italicised metanarrative in the text, in which glimpses of Hillela's subjectivity are shown, she is offered to us almost purely in external form. Her motives and impulses are knowable to us only in so far as she acts on them. The text's refrain "Trust Hillela!" and the assertion that she "never lost her instinct for losers" impregnate her with the same astounding self-assurance and singularity that one would find in the classic picaro. Both figures elaborate a doctrine of sheer survival. They move in a plane of conspicuous politics but their impulses towards action are not, in origin, political. Hillela clearly aligns herself with forces of "enlightenment" but, to my mind, there is a high degree of contingency to her political choices.

Beyond this point, however, Hillela ceases to resemble the male picaro. The picaro moves through a world of unexpected circumstances, new ethical demands, civic events, wars and so on. He responds to obstacles through combat, stratagems, escapes, crimes, ruses and a host of other methods. Hillela, by contrast, possesses *one* main form of action, and that is sex. Nearly all of her shifts from one geography to another, and concomitantly, shifts from one form of being/politics to another, are initiated and ended by a sexual episode. Starting from her early expulsion from school as a result of a potentially sexual friendship with a "Coloured" boy, and ending with her rise to the position of "first lady" through her marriage to a powerful African statesperson, the *chief mechanism* of Hillela's political, spatial and social moves in the text is invariably sexuality.

Only in the "Eastern European" and early "American" sections of the text are Hillela's liaisons insignificant and her sexuality attenuated. Her hair is cropped and her clothes functional - gone is the "yellow swimsuit" of her beachgirl days. We are apparently meant to see this as a sign of mourning for her recently assassinated husband, Whaila, and as a sign of her new political seriousness. Numerous critics point to the fact that Hillela enters history and finds in herself a lasting commitment to social justice after the watershed moment of Whaila's death, and no doubt this is partly accurate. But significantly, her friend Udi asks her telephonically in this new phase how she looks (meaning how she *is*), and she answers: "*I don't know*" (SN 249). At this point, Hillela has turned away from knowledge of the "I": her sexuality has been driven beneath her other energies, such as her new super-efficiency, and she is shown to be precisely least like herself. She does, however, recover; and the mark of this recovery will be the resumption of the supreme primacy of the sexual mode in her interaction with the world.

In spite of deviations, then, the core of this picaro is her sexuality. As the text insistently tells us: "Hillela's field was, surely, men" (SN 279); and "her sexuality was the bread of her being" (283). Many critics of *A Sport of Nature* have observed the centrality of sex in the construction of Hillela as a figure. Parker ponders on the "gratuitous salaciousness" (1989: 218) attaching to descriptions of Hillela, Lenta is intrigued by her "strange sexuality" (1988: 139) and many critics are perturbed by the fact that Hillela effectively sleeps her way up various political hierarchies.

Given that the individual trajectory of Hillela's life exists in conspicuous simultaneity with an African historical trajectory, how then may her sexuality be understood in relation to the political scheme(s) offered to us in the novel? How does the continual foregrounding of Hillela's body tie in with Gordimer's concept of her as a new, contemporary sort of African?

It is clear that Gordimer intended to create a type for a new sort of "white African" in Hillela, one who transcends the sterile and ultimately marginal gestures of a Pauline figure (and her many fictional predecessors) or the perhaps too-parochial sacrifices of a Sasha. It is clear too that Gordimer wished to delineate a white African respectful of black centrality in the struggle but not stricken silent by guilt or impotence. This new African would be free of dogma and hypocrisy, and capable of a proper embracing of an "African" political culture. In attempting to create a model of being untrammelled by excessive intellectualism or convention, it is unsurprising that Gordimer sought out the body as a new mode of expression in politics. The totality of Hillela's bond with Whaila, her sharp pleasure in the blackness of their child and her impulse towards a "rainbow-coloured family" are, for Gordimer, proof of a non-racialism truer than any offered in the conventional field of politics. In a crucial section within the novel's metanarrative - detailing Hillela's untrammelled fascination with Whaila's physicality - the very substance of racial difference is described:

> Lying beside him, looking at pale hands, thighs, belly; seeing herself as unfinished, left off, somewhere. She examines his body minutely and

> without shame...The laws that have determined the course of life for them are made of skin and hair, the relative thickness and thinness of lips and the relative height of the bridge of the nose. That is all; that is everything (SN 177).

A society can be built on a fetishisation of skin and hair and on grim laws performed upon the field of the body, as South African apartheid has done, or on an alternative vision. Hillela is a figure for the expression of a *physical-existential* liberatory politics of race. The continual foregrounding of Hillela's body, its acts and its mode of knowing ("she received everything through [her] skin, understood everything that way", 318) is a way of insisting upon the materiality of race but also, eventually, on its transcendability.

Sexuality can be read, therefore, as a symbolic system within the text, as allegorical of other relations. Clingman comments:

> Hillela's bodily drive - which is fundamentally a sexualised drive - has a political analogue. It is Hillela's sexuality that will take her beyond the artificial boundaries and limits of customary morality, and certainly beyond the boundaries of apartheid into a new world...[T]he opportunity that comes to her, partly through chance, partly through trauma, and partly through the logic and necessity of her nature, is to *ethicise this bodily politics* by transforming it in social terms (1993: 180).

Hillela stands for an organic connectedness with Africa and its politics which occurs through and at the site of her sexuality. Her sexual relationship with Whaila, specifically, encodes the Utopian mood and political meanings of the text in their most condensed form. But how is Whaila's body represented in the text? From Gordimer's first description of him as an "obsidian god" through to her later descriptions of his physical beauty, there are a host of unarticulated cultural/racial stereotypes buried in her presentation of him. Chief among these is the implicit encodement of Whaila as emanating from and sanctioned by nature, as seen, for instance in the following description:

> ...his head [was] a meteorite fallen between them into the sea. Even the hair - black man's kind of hair - had resisted water and remained classically in place as a seabird's feather or the lie of a fish's scale (SN 140).

The proximity of descriptions of Whaila to images of the natural world ensure the association that he is at one with things physical; and, by extension, Hillela's bond with him is a tie with a powerful force of somehow precognitive and instinctive Africanness. In bonding with him and in living through the body, she becomes, in Gordimer's words, "like a black" (interview 1987b: 43). The result of these image patterns is that Whaila and blackness are at once essentialised and romanticised. Whaila's physical charisma and political passion ensure that he is a revolutionary *par excellence* in Gordimer's scheme, but one whose ideology bears the invincible and depoliticised sanctity of the "natural". Hillela acquires the stamp of political virtue in the text merely by means of her "organic" proximity to Whaila. Glenn

reads this proximity as a sign of Gordimer's positing of a certain kind of "national culture" where black identity is the leading component and whites would do well to imbibe it:

> There is, in apartheid South Africa, no national culture, thus, no South Africans. It is only in choosing and making that national culture that one truly becomes South African - and, perhaps, human. Black South Africans and their culture are, however, increasingly identified with the national culture, hence, perhaps, the importance of the sexual attraction and acceptance by white women of black men (1987: 77).

Whaila may well be identifiable with a South African "national culture" which Gordimer embraces and in which Hillela is implicitly included. Hillela's later and intimate association with General Reuel is then an association with a more broadly "African" culture that transcends the bounds of individual nations and which valorises a kind of generic Utopian/African nationalist perspective. In both cases, Hillela's sexual knowledge of these men acts as a guarantor of her absorption into their political validity in the text. Communicating and witnessing a working non-racialism is one of Gordimer's chief political wishes in the 1980s. This non-racialism positions itself under the sign of a broader (black-led) African nationalism in *A Sport of Nature*. Gordimer is at pains to show that non-racialism and nationalism need not be not at odds with each other. A "true" and uncynical nationalism is not based on ethnic distinctions and includes all races under its political banner. Such an inclusive nationalism must be distinguished from what Gordimer sees as "black separatism" (interview 1992b: 925), a form of politics which she dislikes and which both Whaila and Reuel transcend in *A Sport of Nature* But whether non-racial ideology accommodates gender politics as readily as it seems to accommodate racial difference does not seem to be one of Gordimer's primary concerns in this novel.

The political meanings of Hillela's sexuality cannot only be gauged in relation to Whaila. The men Hillela chooses after Whaila's death can also be read as metonyms for specific forms of politics and ways of being. Her American lover, Brad, is a member of an "old" liberal family who believe change can be brought about through well-intentioned intervention on the part of capitalism, and through supporting the kind of aid work Hillela is engaged in. His physical delicacy, brownstone tastes, and infatuation with Hillela cast him in a position of strong contrast to General Reuel. The General's physical bulk, desirability and militant African nationalism make Brad and his politics look enervated and wispy by comparison. Hillela's discarding of Brad from her bed in favour of the General signal her commitment, thereafter, to a political path that entails a militancy and *realpolitik* situated specifically on the African continent.

But in spite of the largesse accorded to Reuel and his politics, he himself is a fairly ambiguous political figure in the text. He smoothly restores his country to stability, but what he instals is a one-party state, the very kind lambasted by the imprisoned Sasha in his letters to Hillela. If Sasha is Gordimer's most closely sanctioned voice of political intelligence in the text, and it appears that he is, then by implication

Reuel is a figure whose larger-than-life portrait Gordimer enjoys creating but who is not the final word on liberation in the text. This does not prevent her from singling him out as the desired mate for her picara, nor from allocating to his portrait a powerful and specifically "African" masculinity which renders his political success in the narrative a virtual *fait accompli*. In all the chief figures in this novel, sexuality and power operate coterminously.

What Hillela actually *does* politically when with Reuel, besides taking inventories of firearms and acting as seductive emissary, is unclear: she takes her political cues from Reuel as she did from Whaila and other men earlier in the book. Significantly, Hillela's final picaresque stop is with a figure of prominent and powerful trans-African nationalism, and it is this political mode which receives Gordimer's final endorsement in the text. The fact that Reuel presides over South Africa's imagined independence celebrations at the novel's end, that he has been a broker in that process, and that his country is an unnamed imaginary example of an African nationalism that "works", instal the General in the text as a source of nationalist politics that is larger than South Africa and further advanced towards a Utopian moment that it is.

But, while purporting to be an ideology that guarantees the rights and needs of all members under its flag, nationalism has been, historically, a deeply exclusivist and gendered paradigm. The collusive relationship between patriarchy, in its many forms, and nationalism, in its many forms, has meant that women often find themselves in a confused and contradictory place - a place of "double ontological insecurity" (Carrera Suarez 1991: 294) - with regard to the polities which claim to protect their rights as subjects and citizens. The fact that a powerful symbolism of motherhood is often rallied by nationalism does little to mitigate this confusion:

> The gender specifics of nationalism are clearly illustrated in the iconographies held dear by nations. In the literature, rhetoric and pageantry of nations, as in nationalist politics and political structures, it is a male figure who is cast as the author and subject of the nation - as faithful soldier, citizen-hero or statesman...The 'female', in contrast, puts in an appearance chiefly in a metaphoric or symbolic role. She is the strength or virtue of the nation incarnate, its fecund first matriarch, but it is a role which excludes her from the sphere of public national life. Figures of mothers of the nation are everywhere emblazoned but the presence of women in the nation is officially marginalised and generally ignored (Boehmer 1991: 6).

As Reuel's wife Hillela is clearly cast as a "mother of the nation" figure and as an apologist for nationhood. She is thus a purveyor of an ideology which employs women as icons of the nation but paradoxically excludes and diminishes them in the field of real politics and rights. Hillela is Gordimer's signifier of revolt against an ugly white imperialist history in Africa - but *is* she, in fact, a signifier of a full revolt? Are there not some contradictions and omissions in Gordimer's own political vision when questions of gender are taken into account? Hillela participates in a nationalism which appears only to gesture towards the inclusion of women into its political dispensation. The fact that Hillela is one beloved, cosseted woman

favoured by powerful African men does not mean that her presence within the ambit of their ideology does anything to mitigate that ideology. In fact, Hillela's presence within a discourse of nationalism signals more of a collusive relationship with it than a subversion.

This possibility of omission and collusion in Gordimer's vision is confirmed by her treatment of other gendered aspects of the text. For instance, her treatment of motherhood reveals some puzzling ambivalences. In the moving sections describing Hillela's love for Whaila, her wish is that she will give birth to a rainbow coloured family made up of children of unexpected hue. After Whaila's assassination, Hillela is forced to give up this personal ideal, and shifts her energies to the well-being of the poverty stricken and the dying on her home continent: "The real family, how they smell. The real rainbow family...The dried liquid of dysentery streaks the legs of babies and old men and the women smell of their monthly blood" (251).

Hillela's political activism is here implicitly inscribed as an extension of the noble and self-sacrificing behaviour expected of mothers under patriarchy. And yet, when it comes to the details of Hillela's mothering of her *own* child, the narrative is astonishingly thin. This is not to say that, in order to be palatable to feminist readers, a text needs to incorporate a detailed apologia on motherhood. What is striking in this case, though, is that Hillela's experience of pregnancy and labour are almost totally occluded in a text where viscerality is not avoided, and the inevitable tactility and sensuousness attendant upon having a very young child are almost completely passed over in a text where sense is paramount. Hillela's interest in her newborn child is focused on what colour the child has turned out, rather than on the child itself. Here and elsewhere in the text, Gordimer's interest in the racial-existential politics she has set up, subsumes the complexities of its concomitant ideas.

A striking factor is the way in which Hillela's daughter is written into the text: almost always as "the child", "the one who" or "the namesake", and seldom by name. An effect of wariness or distancing flows from this sort of language, ensuring *inter alia* that the vivid and foregrounded relationships in the narrative remain those between Hillela and men. Mention of her daughter is seldom made and when it is, it is often in a social scenario when the child serves Hillela in some way (as when she hands round a photograph of the child at a board meeting in order to raise funds, SN: 245). When the child is specifically called by name, it is made clear that she is named "for" a more famous Nomzamo, that is, Winnie Mandela. The latter's elevated position as Mother of the Nation in some of South Africa's liberation discourses (before her periodic falls from grace)[3] rubs off a little on to Hillela's daughter, giving her more of an iconic function in the text than a presence as child or daughter. Her name acts as a constant link back to Hillela's place of origin, her picaresque source, and also as a constant insistence on the importance of revering one's political "mothers".

When Hillela herself becomes a political "mother" as Reuel's wife and comrade, she is not only a symbolical mother to the whole nation but also to Reuel's children by other marriages. Although Reuel does the right thing by respecting his other wives

and seeing to their livelihood, Hillela is clearly his sexual favourite and the one who accompanies him in public life. The radically equivocal aspects of polygamy - the fact that it may largely be seen as a male-centred practice, that it may create relations of exclusion among the wives and that in this case the favoured wife is white and culturally privileged - are fondly neutralised by Gordimer as her own favourite's place in Reuel's cosmos is secure.

Hillela, as usual, occupies the best of both worlds: she accrues around her the customary importance of being a mother to many children in an African family, and yet has been saved the reproductive ardours of bearing so many babies. She can be mother without cost, maintaining the youthfulness of her body for the male touch and gaze. Gordimer is at pains, however, to give Hillela a more-than-mistress status. Reuel's gift of a new name to her that means the same as his own (Chiemeka/"God has done well") positions the two figures on apparently equal footing. We are also told that "a feminine skill of guardianship" has made her "the most trusted...the only indispensable" (SN 307) adviser to the President. But the "power behind the throne" model which inscribes Hillela is essentially an absurdity. However much independent political validity Gordimer attempts to give to her picara, the fact is that Reuel/Rule *precedes* Hillela to power, guides her there or takes her there under the spell of her sexual magnetism. The same can be said for virtually all Hillela's political leaps in the text: they occur via a man, and with his blessing.

Earlier I suggested that there may be a contingency, a haphazardness to Hillela's early political choices. This dates from her first adult affair, that with the dubious Andrew Rey with whom she flees South Africa and enters exile. There does not appear to be anything inherently radical about Hillela's politics to start off with: she could as well have ended up espousing a very different political framework had sexual desire not linked her up with Rey. Arguably, of course, his type of sexuality (intellect and eroticism entwined, and a sort of brooding bohemianism) might be seen by Gordimer as being part of a radical bodily discourse with which she is familiar. Arguably, too, an individual's entrance into politics may well occur through the realm of the personal: no one is *born* revolutionary. But, at least until prior to her taking up with Whaila, political process is not something we are invited to associate with Hillela. Her impulsion towards Rey is framed in almost purely sexual terms in which the content of her beliefs and their growth seem secondary. Likewise, the idea of political exile described in the early chapter called "Tamarisk Beach" is framed as a semi-laconic matter of beaches, sun and sex - and not as the difficult and indeterminate state explored by Gordimer in some of her other texts.

Even once Hillela's commitment to Whaila and his associated politics has begun, it is hard to shed the feeling that Hillela's political alignment is a by-product of her desires. But what can one make of other readings of the text which assert that Hillela's radicality lies precisely *in* her sexuality? Cooper, for instance, uses the following language when describing Hillela:

> Her sexuality, far greater than mere sexiness, is a huge and awe-inspiring kind of *radical passion* (1990: 71).

At this point, Cooper is succumbing to a reading which the text itself continually invites and which Gordimer seems to endorse: Hillela's sexuality is *in and of itself* radical. It stands as an antidote to the impotent and futile consciousness of white South Africans (even, or especially of liberal/left whites like Pauline) and their entrapment in bourgeois codes of behaviour and understanding. Sexuality, then, is read as metonymic: the revolt it carries is a revolt against more than bourgeois codifications of sex. (What "bourgeois sex" is is never fully unravelled by Gordimer. Sterile monogamy and loveless adultery seem to be among its components). Sex is the subversion of a stubborn, regressive and non-Utopian psychic state that whites in South Africa have occupied for decades.

Wagner points out that the kind of sexuality predicated here harkens back to the conceptualisation of sex prevalent in the 60s, where "sensual liberation" was seen as expressive of a larger liberation from the "restrictions of bourgeois respectability" (1994: 89). She also notes the early and ongoing influence of D.H. Lawrence on Gordimer's work, and suggests that *A Sport of Nature*, especially, offers an uncomplicated valorisation of Lawrentian perspectives in its treatment of sexuality (88-90). Through such a perspective, unrestricted sex is seen as unequivocally liberating and itself *in no need* of critical examination.

Gordimer herself sees Hillela as a creature whose instincts are fuller and more immediate than those of the "average" person:

> I'm fascinated by people like Hillela. There are people who live instinctively, who act first and think afterward. And they are great survivors. And I think that cerebral people like myself have often been inclined to look down on them. And then you find that you've really been quite wrong (interview 1990: 278).

In this capacity for living in the fore of her instincts, Hillela is clearly not average. Her capacity for *jouissance*, the energy she stamps on to the text and the zest she displays for all things mark her off from all her female counterparts in Gordimer's other works. Hillela's presence adds an element of *play* to Gordimer's narrative that many readers clearly welcome. But to return to the question of her non-averageness: whose norms does she breach and how does sexuality tie in with the question of norm?

Critics have extensively dealt with Hillela's function as a "sport" or subverter of the white South African way of life and of the closed-mindedness that go with it. But we need to unpack the novel's title further. The fact that Gordimer is attracted to the idea of a sport *of nature* is highly significant. Hillela's power appears to stem from something pre-given inside her and sanctioned by nature, in apparent contradistinction with those around her who are overly mastered by social injunction. Such an assumption might presuppose that there is a place where instincts can be free of culture, where libido obeys its own immanent and transhistorical laws.

Can such an assumption be tenable? Vance comments:

> Cultures provide widely different categories, schemata and labels for framing sexual and affective experiences. The relationship of sexual act and identity to sexual community is equally variable and complex (1992: 134).

Gordimer herself appears to waver between viewing Hillela as a figure driven by instincts (that are asocial, beyond the social), and as a socially embedded creature whose behaviour exists on a continuum with numerous other practices. One of the major paradoxes of *A Sport of Nature* is that, while apparently representing a way of being that departs from the over-encoded, lifeless and constraining models that other women occupy, Hillela in fact falls into a highly recognisable status that patriarchy has allocated to women for centuries: that of object-of-the-gaze. The imperative of gazing between Hillela and men tends to eclipse all other relations. There are very few female relationships in the text, and those that exist are purportedly "close" but exceedingly insubstantial in narrative terms. Her friendships with black women, in particular, furnish comfortable but attenuated material. While Whaila and Reuel might be encoded in romanticising ways, they are at least major presences in the text. Black women, whether Reuel's uncomplaining other wives or Hillela's political confidantes, are diffuse figures who detract nothing from Hillela's giantess status in the narrative. Gordimer's attempt at positing a new kind of African woman is paradoxically purged of material which might explore viable modes of relation between black and white women.

By far the most prominent mode of social relation described in *A Sport of Nature* is then of Hillela being needed, watched and enjoyed by men. A nexus of attractions with Hillela at its centre spans the novel. Moreover, male sexual knowledge of her is described as coming through typically fetishing signifiers: flashes of her breasts, eyes and hair feature prominently in Gordimer's prose. Hillela's body (or parts of it) is the one abiding descriptive constant across hundreds of pages of geographical relocation and political machination. All men are implicitly subject to Hillela's powers (except the celibate Udi who paradoxically has one of the richer relationships with Hillela in the text, sex being removed from the equation). This results in a flattening of potential "difference" among most of the male figures and casts them into a surprisingly static position: the position of binary to Hillela's equally artificial and hyperbolised sexual status.

An interesting line of descent links Hillela to her mother and then in turn to her daughter: all three figures (when young) have enormous powers of allure for men. It is implied that Hillela's mode of sexuality is an almost *genetic* state, and this confirms the idea of her libido as naturally ordained rather than culturally responsive. It is surely no surprise that Hillela's daughter grows up to be an internationally acclaimed model: what more extreme incarnation can one have of female sexuality being commodified, hypostatised and predicated upon male desire? Towards the end of the narrative Nomzamo glides in and out of various scenarios in *chic sauvage* garb, showing as little personality (or politics) as when the text earlier dubbed her "the namesake". Nomzamo occupies the commodified category "exotic sexy woman" and there is little else that constitutes her.

One of the generic features of Gordimer's texts is her tendency to use the body in highly connotative and displaced ways (Lazar 1990 and 1992). When Gordimer wishes to devalue the credibility or social worth of a female figure she spares little in making her dowdy or repugnant; a related feature in her texts is her tendency to foreground younger women over older women. In social contexts where loss of looks threatens a woman with invisibility and powerlessness, ageing will surely be a doubly difficult process. Gordimer does little to challenge the attitudes that make such contexts possible. When Hillela eventually finds her mother in *A Sport of Nature*, Ruth's false teeth and jaded looks carry the suggestion that Hillela can hardly be blamed for not pursuing contact with her. The present belongs to Hillela.

Significantly,the triumphal end of *A Sport of Nature* occurs when Hillela is just forty. The ageing process is faintly visible in her - she is "rounder than she must have been when she was a girl" - but she is still "unlined" and a "real beauty" (SN 345). Would the ending have been less triumphant had Hillela been older? Can Gordimer not permit a future for her picara beyond beauty? The last descriptions in the text give a full-blown sense of spectacle, the Independence celebrations being set against the grandeur of Cape Town's Table Mountain. As the lens narrows its focus to take in the gorgeous figure of Hillela, it is obvious that Hillela herself is also a spectacle, and that she and the nationalism she purveys have reached their prime simultaneously and together.

Just as Hillela's power is cast in the language of sex, so too the political culmination of the text is libidinised. One cannot miss the highly sexualised and machismo-ridden encoding of the nationalist climax; cannons "ejaculate" from the castle. After this climax, what possibilities? Just as a vision of Hillela-at-sixty is stopped short by the ending, so too a vision of nationalism beyond its promises is discouraged. Indeed, there *is* a final analogy between Hillela's sexuality and the nationalist politics she occupies: both bear signs of optimism and fecundity, and both fail to offer any lasting critique of the patriarchal discourses upon which they are predicated. The fact that Hillela has achieved maturity but has not yet suffered any loss of beauty is the final symptomatisation of her metonymic place in the text: she is a glamorous revolutionary in a largely glamorised revolution.

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It would be a very sour-tempered feminism that would take no pleasure in Hillela's conveyance of *jouissance*, nor in her vibrancy and her refusal to be cowed by injunctions of good behaviour in women. But one cannot escape the fact that Gordimer's treatment of Hillela as a figure who gets what she wants through sexy but unholy means, is an irony taken at the expense of a *political* feminism which sees female power as constructed out of more than women's sexuality. The fact that Hillela is a "sport", an aberration, also foregrounds the sharp individualism which she represents, in contradistinction with attempts by various political feminisms at seeing women in sectoral ways.

It is striking that the very traits Gordimer dislikes in the kind of feminism she dubs "piffling" in the early 80s[4] - namely individualism and élitism, and a concern with appearances - surface in her presentation of Hillela. Critics who insist that Hillela is a "feminist" miss the irony that Hillela could indeed be classed as a signifier of liberal/bourgeois feminism in her empowering of the self under existing systems - *but*, in Gordimer's own book, this makes her feminism "piffling".

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ENDNOTES

1. For comments on mythic and allegorical aspects of the novel, see for example Cooper (1990) and Lenta (1988). For readings of Gordimer's approach to questions of recent South African history in the novel, see for example Temple-Thurston (1991) and Smyer (1992).

2. Several critics have drawn a link between *A Sport of Nature* and instances of the "colonial picaresque", such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. See, for instance, Yelin (1992) and Glenn (1987).

3. Due to the suspicious circumstances surrounding the violent death of a child called Stompie Sepei - with whom Winnie Mandela had had some contact - Mrs Mandela's moral credentials in the late 80s were questioned in various quarters of South Africa's liberation movements. However, her election to the position of head of the ANC's Women's League in late 1993, and her appointment as Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture after the 1994 election, suggested for a while that her formal political influence was on the rise again. In early 1995, Mrs Mandela was fired from her government post by President Mandela for mismanagement of funds and disloyalty to the government, among other reasons.

4. In the early 80s, Gordimer comments:

> 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've been 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 (Interview with Boyers et.al. 1984: 19).

At this stage in the 80s Gordimer's objections to feminism are a response to a particular *brand* of feminism she has witnessed in privileged circles. She makes allusion to "harder, more thinking" kinds of feminism later in the 80s (interview 1993).

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