

# The Politics of Place and the Question of Subjectivity in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*

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## **Subjectivity as Spatial Construction**

Any idea of subjectivity as individual consciousness, freedom and responsibility becomes problematic within a social context because what determines the individual being is not consciousness per se but the social and cultural world that shapes consciousness. The subject is therefore always already social, always connected with the contexts and histories of particular social and cultural worlds. 'The initial constructions of subjectivity are thus performed as spatial construction upon which a dialectic of self-reflection as the self-questioning of being may be based' (Noyes 1992: 65). John K. Noyes in *Colonial Space* explains that the construction of subjectivity in colonial space<sup>1</sup> is closely linked to the meaning of that space, its history, politics and discourse. In the South African context, the concept of autonomous subjectivity is additionally problematised by diverse racial classifications of apartheid and their repercussions on gender, sexuality and politics. It is further complicated by the various often conflicting oppositional ideologies for combating these constructions.

Nadine Gordimer's preoccupation with 'place' in *Burger's Daughter* (1979) takes shape as an attempt to explore the subjectivity of the female protagonist, Rosa Burger, daughter of an Afrikaner, middle-class, communist revolutionary, Lionel Burger, who is based on South Africa's prominent communist leader, Bram (Abraham) Fischer.<sup>2</sup> Gordimer has said of *Burger's Daughter* that the theme came to her 'as a question: what is it like to be the daughter of a hero, in a country where social strife still produces the hero figure' (Gordimer 1980: 17). The white daughter in the novel

is affected by almost all aspects of social and political life in South Africa because she is the daughter of a man who has chosen a particular political position as a communist revolutionary in which she is naturally implicated. Placing the exploration within such a context raises several issues. The daughter of the hero figure inherits not only the ramifications of social conflicts but also the burdens, expectations, and roles which the father takes on. Her father's ideology in which her entire childhood and upbringing have been subsumed is a communist ideology uncompromisingly committed to social responsibility. There is a sense then in which the novel is also an examination of the 'human conflict between the desires to live a personal, private life, and the rival claim of social responsibility to one's fellow men—human advancement' (Ibid.). It is thus within the context of this almost universal dilemma that Rosa grapples with a sense of place and her individual identity within it.

*Burger's Daughter* explores female subjectivity in a particular environment of political struggle in the 1970s when the Black Consciousness movement and the uprising of the youth in Soweto dominated black politics in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> In exploring the protagonist's subject position, the novel juxtaposes the conflicting discourses of Lionel and Rosa Burger: Lionel's political, paternal and ideological discourse and Rosa's conflicting political and private yearnings. The protagonist's subjectivity is also explored within the contesting political ideologies of this period: the National Party's apartheid ideology, the Black Consciousness ideology, Lionel Burger's communism and South Africa's liberal humanism. Situated at the intersection of manifold ideologies and complex political stances,

and in the intersection of race, gender and sexuality which structure the larger society of South Africa, Rosa is a multiply positioned subject. The criss-crossing of ideologies, contexts and characters in the novel means that we confront here different conceptions and claims of place. Gordimer wrote *Burger's Daughter* at a most politically volatile period of South African history when the liberal ideology she had upheld all along had to contend with other compelling ideologies and particularly with a new assertive Black Consciousness movement, which was poised to seize the initiative and direct the resistance against apartheid. The novel is a much more ambitious project than her earlier works because it perceives place in South Africa in wider terms, confronting an entire transitional period in South African history. It broadens the ramifications of the protagonist's dilemma by first accepting the reality of place and by exploring in a personal and subjective way the conflicting political, cultural and ideological realities that define the meaning of place in South Africa and the personal, inner, subjective self on whom these realities impact. It is within these wider and complex public affiliations that the protagonist, Rosa, negotiates a self.

Gordimer's exploration of the protagonist's subjectivity in *Burger's Daughter* is spatial and dialectic, involving an interrogative journey into different spaces. Rosa's conflictual personal and public relationships encourage her to move away from her old self, defined by her parents' political creed, towards a self-questioning journey in which she searches for her autonomous identity. Rosa travels to different spaces not only within South Africa but also to Europe and back to South Africa again. It is through the heroine's multiple encounters with these spaces that Gordimer defines the South African experience as distinct from that of any other part of the world.

As a metaphor for movement, the journey reflects not only shifts in spaces and the possibility of new knowledge, but also connotes perceptual changes that may lead to a reevaluation of those secure spaces which

define our sense of home. Because of these metaphoric possibilities, journey has become a common trope for all kinds of issues in literary representation. Daniel Kunene, writing on the journey as metaphor in African literature, sees its symbolic connotations as both a consolidation of the idea of home and a rejection of its implications: 'home is a sanctuary. Its offer of physical and spiritual sustenance is the gravitational pull that ensures that whatever leaves it will ultimately lose its outward momentum and return' (Kunene 1985: 189). Rosa's journey is also a symbolic one in the sense that her physical separation from home is 'a metaphorical statement to be decoded as a spiritual and cultural alienation' (Ibid.: 196).

In *Burger's Daughter*, the public and the personal intersect in an interrogative novel in which all facets of social, political and emotional life are implicated. Catherine Belsey defines the interrogative novel as that which

disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of the enunciation. The position of the 'author' inscribed in the text, if it can be located at all, is seen as questioning or as literally contradictory....The world represented in the interrogative text includes what Althusser calls 'an internal distance' from the ideology in which it is held, which permits the reader to construct from within the text a critique of this ideology....In other words, the interrogative text refuses a single point of view, however complex and comprehensive, but brings points of view into unresolved collision or contradiction. It therefore refuses the hierarchy of discourses of classic realism, and no authorial or authoritative discourse points to a single position which is the place of the coherence of meaning (1980: 91-92).

The point of the interrogative novel is to set all rival views and ideologies against each other and in the process arrive at a humanistic ideology that can transcend the failures of them all. *Burger's Daughter* presents no single privileged discourse of the protagonist but all conflicting ideologies and discourses are brought into question and negotiated from different positions and from various perspectives. It is in con-

fronting these rival perspectives that Rosa recognises the need and urgency for a reevaluation of the Burger political heritage. This is the very process through which Rosa explores her subject position through her interrogative journey.

Here, the interrogative novel is structured as a dialectic in which the protagonist explores various aspects of South African experience. The dialogic novel situates the protagonist's voice and perspective in the midst of several others. Dialogue thus presents various concepts, perspectives, and positions and hence creates doubts, tensions and conflicts, all of which are part of a greater world and in constant interaction with each other. Gordimer quotes from Nietzsche that 'truth begins in dialogue' (1973: 50) in order to make her point that 'what the South African novel is doing at present is making heard that dialogue' (Ibid.: 52). The process of Rosa's interrogation is a multi-voiced dialogue that subverts the certainty of the unified voice because, in her world, there is no consensus about social and moral values and she continually questions and negotiates moral and ideological positions throughout the processes of her development.

In terms of this dialectic, Bakhtin's concept of dialogism<sup>4</sup> is important for analysing Gordimer's narrative in *Burger's Daughter* because it is an example of novelistic heteroglossia where language is structured as a multilineal dialectic. Bakhtin explains his concept of dialogism in the novel genre in terms of 'heteroglossia' as 'the social diversity of speech types':

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.... Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others....the unitariness [of language] is relative to the overpowering force of heteroglossia, and thus dialogism (Ibid.: 262, 426, my editing).

Bakhtin explains the force of 'heteroglossia' in the novel:

When heteroglossia enters the novel it becomes subject to an artistic reworking. The social and historical voices populating language, all its words and all its forms, which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualizations, are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of his epoch (Ibid.: 300).

Heteroglossia in Gordimer's novel helps to describe a wider context of the process in which the protagonist questions the meaning of place and negotiates her subjectivity independent of her father. It is appropriate then that the narrative should take on a dialogic structure in which Rosa is continually engaged in a dialogue with different characters who represent those different places of South Africa and Europe. In Bakhtin's 'dialogism', 'language, when it *means*, is somebody talking to somebody else, even when that someone else is one's own inner addressee' (Bakhtin 1992: xxi). In this dialogue in the progress of her becoming, each character is questioned and each place is examined in terms of its historical, cultural, and socio-political values. Rosa's interrogative dialogue with different people gives her the time and space to understand who she is in relation to place and in relation to her world. In this interrogation, she is also trying to move away from her heritage, that is, what was inevitable about her family situation as an Afrikaner and as the daughter of deeply committed political activists. The novel thus shows a composite narrative form of dialogism and interrogation reflecting the author's more complex scheme of exploring a wider context of South Africa through which to construct a new subjectivity for the female protagonist.

Apart from the various experiences, confrontations and incidents to which Rosa responds in the process of self-understanding, there are several letters to crucial characters—her first lover, Conrad, her father's first wife, Katya, and her father, Lionel—which

create an ongoing dialogue between Rosa and those characters who have different consciousness and perspectives from her own. As Gordimer writes, 'one is never talking to oneself, always one is addressed to someone' (16). Gordimer explains in more psychological terms that 'in your life, in your conduct, you are always secretly addressing somebody....We are, as individuals, different individuals to different people. We have many selves' (Interview, 1993: 15). The letters are a way of constructing a dialectic and an argument through which Rosa questions and explores her subjectivity. Through this dialogue, the narrative interrogates the meaning of place, the nature of the commitment to social responsibility and the yearnings of the inner life.

Throughout the novel there is considerable tension between Rosa's experience of her individual and separate self and the constantly encroaching public world of her parents which she must submit to because she is part of the family unit. Whereas daughters in Gordimer's earlier novels have distanced themselves from their families because of a growing sense of their own public and political perspective, the daughter in this novel attempts to define a personal identity by struggling with a public one. The very beginning of the novel plunges us into the problem of Rosa's public identity when we are presented with the scene at the prison court where Rosa waits to visit her mother inside. What overshadows everything in this scene is Rosa's very public image as the political daughter. The sub-narrative of a detainee's family presents a very static public image of the schoolgirl as the daughter of communist parents:

*'The child was dry-eyed and composed, in fact she was an example to us all of the way a detainee's family ought to behave. Already she had taken on her mother's role in the household, giving loving support to her father....He knew that his schoolgirl daughter could be counted on in this family totally united in and dedicated to the struggle'* (12).

The narrative suggests that Rosa has little private

space in her life and is being denied her desire, her ambition, even her own voice. The ideological position of her parents has always impacted on her own personal life and development.

### ***The Body as a Site of Conflict***<sup>5</sup>

The novel's epigraph, 'I am the place in which something has occurred', cited from Claude Lévi-Strauss, can be read as signifying the protagonist's body as the place in which something has occurred and from which subjectivity is explored. In Gordimer's novels, the human body and its sexuality are so continually politicised that they become issues either in consolidating the status quo of white power or in fighting against it. In the South African context, there is indeed a distinct connection between sexuality and politics because the human body resided at the very centre of the segregations which were an essential part of the social policy of apartheid. Gordimer's constant exploration of the connection between private and public lives can be explained by the social condition of the country where even sexual relationships as the most private sphere of life were controlled by the politics of the body that decided how people were classified according to physical attributes. The body that was regulated by official laws was the same body which was at play in the expression of sexuality. The politics of the body therefore significantly affected the ways in which people expressed themselves through their bodies and their sexuality. Gordimer explores in her imaginative writing her characters' bodies and their sexuality as a locus of conflict, tension, contradiction and revolt against the white familial values and the social system of apartheid.

The necessity for exploring a more natural expression of sexuality is raised early in the novel when we recognise the conflicting relationship between the sensual and the political in Rosa's bodily relationships with men, with her father, her lovers and her brother. These relationships are where her sub-

jectivity assumes its various positions. The extent to which her natural inner development is confused by her father's revolutionary cause and her family's communist ideals is seen in the dialectic between the private and the public, inside and outside, and the personal and the political in the scene where Rosa is surprised by an unexpected sexual awakening of her body:

Outside the prison the internal landscape of my mysterious body turns me inside out, so that in that public space on that public occasion....I am within that monthly crisis of destruction, the purging, tearing, draining, of my own structure (15-16).

The narrative demonstrates here the tension between Rosa's existential quest as a private being and the imperatives of her public role. Her personality and behaviour, the narrative implies, have been constructed by her parents' political necessities, for which she has sacrificed her own private need. Her life as a child and her progress in society have already been mapped out in accordance with a political life she has not chosen.

This kind of tension is heightened even further when she accepts the political ploy to play the lover of the imprisoned activist, Noel de Witt. The narrative presents this as a major conflict between Rosa's political role as the fake fiancée of the political prisoner and the very natural, emotional and intimate feelings she develops for Noel:

Every month I was told what must be communicated in the guise of my loving prison letter....I didn't know, ever, whether I had succeeded in writing with the effect of a pretence (for him to read as such) what I really felt about Noel so tenderly and passionately....I accused *him*-Lionel Burger, knowing as he did, without question, I would do what had to be done (66).

In this particular project of impersonation, the make-believe world of Rosa actually clashes with her true feeling and desire, disturbing her growing sexual awakening and setting off a confusion between public

political commitment and private feelings which later sends her on her search for personal subjectivity.

### ***The Interlocking Spaces of White and Black Worlds***

In *Burger's Daughter*, the most searching and traumatic struggle with the meaning of place takes place when Rosa confronts the black African space in the township. This township space connotes the contrasts between the black world and the white spaces she knows, such as her own Afrikaner and communist household and other white spaces, as the historically determined segregation and impoverishment of black world at the margins of the white spaces. What she recognises during this visit is that, in South Africa, space is never a unified concept but a multiple interlocking series of spaces which affect all persons whatever they define for themselves. Each group in South Africa may legitimate its own private and cultural space but that space is never an isolated space unconnected with other equally legitimate spaces.

Rosa's confrontation with the township is dialogically structured as an argument with her personal understanding of space in South Africa. Gordimer offers the black space in the township more of an ideological composition in the political debates among the black youth and people with a mixture of backgrounds. The debate at the black activist, Marisa Kgosana's house is a critical point because it makes Rosa aware of the various reactions to apartheid. It also opens up her mind to all the other perspectives and nuances that her father's house does not offer. Rosa's meeting with black activists like Marisa and Duma Dhladhla impacts profoundly on her perceptions of her father's political world and its limitations. The Burger household has tended too much to see the freedom and liberation that its own organisation and commitment have been working towards and they seem to be unaware of the nuances and perspectives that Rosa picks up at the debate in the township. Confronting these doubts is a way of confronting the ambivalences and contradic-

tions which the certainties of her father's politics do not grapple with. Duma Dhladhla, a young activist representing the radical perspectives of the black youth, rejects white liberal ideology and the involvement of white liberals in the liberation movement:

“Whites, whatever you are, it doesn't matter. It's no difference. You can tell them—Afrikaners, liberals, Communists. We don't accept anything from anybody. We take. D'you understand? We take for ourselves.... These theories don't fit us. We are not interested. You've been talking this shit before I was born....White liberals run around telling blacks it's immoral to unite as blacks, we're all human beings, it's just too bad there's white racism, we just need to get together, 'things are changing', we must work out together the *solution*.... Whites don't credit us with the intelligence to know what we want! We don't need their *solutions*” (157, 162-63, my editing).

What Rosa recognises here is liberalism's failure in its relation to the social realities and racist policies that have given rise to the radicalism of black youths like Dhladhla. The entire township scene thus demonstrates how Rosa's experience in that space enlarges her understanding of the reality of South African politics, its racial implications and ideological complexities.

This township space also connotes the relations between the older black activists and the more radical Black Consciousness activists, where there is an entire history of black response to and conception of place, role and relevance that has several implications for Lionel Burger's politics and Rosa's present dilemmas of definition. We recognise from the arguments between the older and younger black activists that the Black Consciousness movement has a new perception of place and of the relevance and role of this place, or its relations with other spaces within South Africa. Rosa begins to understand the complexity and enormity of public commitment in her society when the debate among black youths registers differences not only between ideologies or positions but also between the older and newer generations within the black community. Dhladhla argues that the Black Consciousness

ideology is against the perspectives of the older people who are more compromising and inadequate in the reality of the liberation struggle:

These people will always let themselves be used by the whites. They are our biggest problems; we have to re-educate....There are no more old men like that one, that old father—a slave who enjoys the privileges of the master without rights. It's finished....Our liberation cannot be divorced from black consciousness because we cannot be conscious of ourselves and at the same time remain slaves (153, 157, 164, my editing).

The ideology of Black Consciousness inspired the development of class-consciousness among black workers and a dynamic movement of protest among black students. Steve Biko, a student leader of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) and an acknowledged 'father' of the Black Consciousness movement wrote *I Write What I Like* between 1969 and 1972:

Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation—the blackness of their skin—and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the “normal” which is white....It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their values systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life.

The interrelationship between the consciousness of the self and the emancipatory programme is of paramount importance. Blacks no longer seek to reform the system because so doing implies acceptance of the major points around which the system revolves.

Blacks are out to completely transform the system and to make of it what they wish. (1978: 49)

The Black Consciousness movement that dominated South African politics at that time created all kinds of conflicts and problems between the old guard and the younger generations, and the new radicals and the liberals. It threw liberalism itself into total disarray and left white people without a political centre from which

they could engage in the larger historical movement of the time.

Gordimer wrote in her 'Letter from Johannesburg, 1976'<sup>6</sup> that liberalism in South Africa<sup>7</sup> failed in the events of 1976 during the six months of the Soweto Protest when most of the victims were school children:

We whites do not know how to deal with the fact of this death when children, in full knowledge of what can happen to them, continue to go out to meet it at the hands of the law, for which we are solely responsible, whether we support white supremacy or, opposing, have failed to unseat it....It seems old white adversaries might be accepted but white liberals will never be forgiven their inability to come to power and free blacks (1989: 121-23).

Gordimer's awareness of Black Consciousness is explicitly central to the major theme of *Burger's Daughter*. The breakdown of liberal ideals explored in her earlier novels, such as *Occasion for Loving* (1963) and in *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966a), is even further examined in this novel in the face of the radical movement of black politics which challenged the whole idea of political collaboration and declared its independence in the struggle for liberation. Abdul R. JanMohamed observes that '*Burger's Daughter* can be seen as Gordimer's post-Soweto examination of white consciousness, as a reply to the Black Consciousness Movement' (1983: 139).

As Rosa interrogates her father's politics, she confronts the larger society which this politics seeks to change. Her encounter with a dead tramp in the park reveals other aspects of her father's politics—its inability to deal with day-to-day realities of South African life. The sight of the tramp's dead body in the park opens her eyes to the drawbacks of her father's politics and ideology. The scene questions the effectiveness of her father's political ideology and its ability to influence the realities of ordinary people:

Nothing could change the isolation of that man....There

is an element of human wastage in all societies. But—in that house—it was believed that when we had changed the world (yes, in spite of, beyond the purges, the liquidations, the forced labour and imprisonments)—the 'elimination of private conflicts set up by the competitive nature of capitalist society' would help people to live, even people like this one, who, although white and privileged under the law of the country, couldn't make a place of himself (78-80).

Gordimer recognises the failures of communism in 'Living in the Interregnum' (1982):

Because communism since 1917 has turned out not to be just or humane either, has failed this promise even more cruelly than capitalism, have we to tell the poor and dispossessed of the world there is nothing else to be done than to turn back from the communist bosses to the capitalist bosses? In South Africa's rich capitalist state stuffed with Western finance, fifty thousand black children a year die from malnutrition and malnutrition-related diseases, while the West piously notes that communist states cannot provide their people with meat and butter. In two decades in South Africa, three million black people have been ejected from the context of their lives, forcibly removed from homes and jobs and 'resettled' in arid, underdeveloped areas (1989: 281-82).

Rosa's uncertainty about her existence reflects not only the burden of social contradictions caused by the divisiveness of apartheid, but also the inadequacy of her father's philosophy to deal with such an extremely difficult and insurmountable reality of her society. Her interrogative narrative focuses on doubts, uncertainties, ambivalences and ruptures which that communist ideology cannot totally solve:

The revolution we lived for in that house would change the lives of the blacks who left their hovels and compound at four in the morning to swing picks....But the change from life to death—what had all the certainties I had from my father to do with that?...Nothing that had served to make us sure of what we were doing and why had anything to do with what was happening....I was left out. It had been left out. Justice, equality, the brotherhood of man, human dignity—but *it will still be there* (79-80).

In *Burger's Daughter*, Rosa's critical questions and observations of her father's ideology are not a simple dismissal and rejection of the communist principle. What we see in her letters to her first lover, Conrad, is the complexity of the process in which she juxtaposes her parents' commitment to social responsibility with Conrad's egotistic bourgeois individualism. While the Burgers commit themselves to social responsibility as if they were not individuals in their own right, the Burger house has its own form of individualism. Although she defends communism against Conrad's individualism, she is also transcending that easy connection between races and places that communism assumes. Rosa's narrative represents her recognition of the psychological barriers that taint relationships between the races and places in South Africa:

Lionel—my mother and my father—people in that house, had a connection with blacks that was completely personal. In this way, their Communism was the antithesis of anti-individualism. The connection was something no other whites ever had in quite the same way. A connection without reservations on the part of blacks or whites....Lionel and my mother did not stand before Duma Dhladhla and have him say: I don't think about that.

They had the connection because they believed it possible. (172).

In *Burger's Daughter*, the doubts, contradictions and uncertainties that Rosa uncovers in the Burger heritage encompass more than the public domain. In relating to the meaning of place at a different time and from a different personal crisis, Rosa is negotiating her own perspective and political commitment. The narrative of *Burger's Daughter* also implies that it is because Rosa's exploration is a personal and subjective one that she can uncover what the more public perspective of the Burger heritage must have glossed over. Indeed, it is because Rosa's objective and critical assessment of her father's ideology arises out of her independent and personal view of her experience and her willingness to enter into dialogue with other views

that it uncovers the complexity of the social reality in apartheid South Africa and its toll on interracial connections. Thus, when Gordimer cites from Gramsci in 'Living in the Interregnum' that 'the old is dying, and the new cannot be born' (1989: 263), she refers not only to the old system of apartheid but also the old liberalism of her earlier novels and the communism of the Burgers which must now be re-examined in the new political context.

Nuances and aspects of racial connections which differ from those of the Burger house are particularly revealed in Rosa's encounter with the man who commits excessive violence on a donkey. The black man's hideous violence is the expression of his uncontrollable agony, pain, and despair, generated by the cruelty of South African social conditions in which sufferings, torture, oppression and violence are institutionalised and perpetuated:

Not seeing the whip, I saw the infliction of pain broken away from the will that creates it; broken loose, a force existing of itself, ravishment without the ravisher, torture without the torturer, rampage, pure cruelty gone beyond control of the humans who have spent thousands of years devising it. The entire ingenuity from thumb-screw and rack to electric shock, the infinite variety and gradation of suffering, by lash, by fear, by hunger, by solitary confinement (208).

This encounter is significant because Rosa recognises the hidden aspects of that unreserved and uncomplicated connection between blacks and whites that the Burger house thought it had created. She realises that the very authority she herself has as a white South African is part of the unjust society which produces the black man's misery and suffering: 'if somebody's going to be brought to account, I am accountable for him, to him, as he is for the donkey' (210). Her preoccupation with the burden of place and her hesitation about leaving South Africa are finally overridden by this experience: 'Nothing and nobody stopped me from using that passport. After the donkey I couldn't stop myself. I don't know how to live in Lionel's country' (210).

Rosa thus resolves to defect from her father's country and hence from the predicament of being Burger's daughter. She now moves from the centre of political movement in South Africa to the more personal realm of sexual life. Her crisis in her relation to place in South Africa is thus marked by a break and a change of direction when she decides to leave her father's country for France.

### ***The Narrative Significance of Exile***

Rosa's exile in Europe has a thematic and structural purpose. It is part of the dialogic structure of the novel and is a process of interrogation and further exploration. The exile presents the protagonist with the distance necessary for resolving her dilemmas and conflicts. This act of departure is a choice that is often made by characters in Gordimer's novels. Gordimer herself expresses the conflicting urge to leave as something she has personally faced:

I myself fluctuate between the desire to be gone—to find a society for myself where my white skin will have no bearing on my place in the community—and a terrible, obstinate and fearful desire to stay. I feel the one desire with my head and the other with my guts. I know that there must be many others who feel as I do (1989: 34).

The dilemma that Gordimer voices here involves complex and delicate choices between escaping the disempowering realities of her racist society and staying on to confront them and grapple with their implications. They are choices that entail divisions between an individual's mind and feeling. The reasonable logical desire is the desire to leave, while the gut feeling, which is bound with everything that emotionally and politically connects him/her to place, is the desire to stay. In *Burger's Daughter*, what we have is a temporary exile which provides the necessary separation for self-understanding. Rosa's absence in Europe helps to clarify the wider meanings of place and the nature of her own subjectivity within it.

The thematic purpose of Rosa's exile is also that it continues the theme of the politics of place. It allows Rosa to locate herself in a different space and experience. It also allows her to contemplate what it means to be the self without the politics of place. Her journey is a deliberate distancing of place and, in the context of the narrative, it is a movement forward. Her attempt to defect from her father is her journey 'to know somewhere else' (185) where she may be offered an alternative personal life. Her exile from home in this 'place of Foreign Sojourn'<sup>6</sup> is another site of exploring different values and cultures and hence assessing that home. This is also the moment when her own values and perspectives are put to the test.

The structural purpose of Rosa's exile is that it sets up a dialogue. The dialogism arises from the two visions of place as well as the two visions of the self—the self encumbered with place and the self free from place. The dialogism also rests on the two perspectives on Lionel and his politics which Rosa needs to negotiate in order to explore her own subjectivity. Her journey to know that "'there's a whole world" outside what he lived for' (264) is part of her anxiety to explore a separate identity outside the one thrust on her by virtue of being her father's daughter. Her search for autonomy entails deconstructing her father's identity and his values not only as a political but also as a personal being. The novel thus continues to negotiate, through the dialogic narrative, a possible autonomous existence for Rosa.

A new perspective on Lionel's political commitment is presented by his first wife, Katya, who fled from South Africa to the South of France. She points out the tyranny of his communist cause which denies the pursuit of personal life. The Burgers' political ideology is also a kind of oppressive manipulation of Rosa. Her choice of Katya as a catalyst for her interrogation and personal quest is therefore significant because she represents another female subject whose life was once deeply affected by Lionel and his ideology and who had to make the choice of leaving South Africa at some

point in her relationship with him. She has experienced the same conflicts of political commitment and revolutionary cause, and the same burdens and dilemmas as Rosa. On a more subconscious level, Rosa chooses Katya's place in France because she wants to know how to defect from Lionel. Katya could not live in South Africa for its future, for the change of the world, because she could not give up her private life for the human cause. She has hidden away from the moral obligations of South Africa in the consolations of private life, believing that there is another life and another world outside Lionel's. Katya becomes for Rosa a double that mirrors her past and her present. However, Gordimer prepares a different context for each of the women in terms of how Lionel has affected their lives: 'The fact—the fact of Lionel—when the passing of daily life thinned or shifted to reveal it, made, like a change of light transforming the aspect of a landscape, the two women into something else for each other' (247).

### ***The Body as the Locus of Sexual and Political Being***

In her retreat from the political scene in her country to Europe, Rosa reclaims her desire as a private woman and thereby redeems her body. Rosa's body becomes the locus where Gordimer explores female subjectivity in terms of a sexual/political, private/public being. Her body is the site where she experiences both internal and external realities of South African politics and it is where Gordimer deals with the formation of female subjectivity by creating a conflictual and dialogic process of exploring the protagonist's complex identity.

France with its landscapes, history, culture and aesthetic heritage awakens all kinds of sensual and passionate impulses within Rosa. Her natural spontaneous self thrives within a world in which no one expects a political commitment from her, and in which she would not shoulder any large moral burdens of responsibility and guilt. In this paradise of a totally dif-

ferent world from the South African environment, Rosa's sense of herself becomes transformed as if 'dissolving in the wine and pleasure of scents, sights and sounds existing only in themselves, associated with nothing and nobody' (222). The narrative thus stresses the more sensual and sexual aspects of human life through the portrayal of Katya's world of decadence and how Rosa is transformed within it. The narrative depicts Rosa's room in Katya's house as having an entirely different sense of life from that of the Burger's house. The description is emphatically sensual, creating an aura of voluptuousness around her:

It was a room made ready for someone imagined. A girl, a creature whose sense of existence would be in her nose buried in flowers, peach juice running down her chin, face tended at mirrors, mind dreamily diverted, body seeking pleasure. Rosa Burger entered, going forward into possession by that image (230).

The impact of a different place in France is central to her exploration of her being because it is the place where for the first time she has an insight into sensuality and sensual aesthetics and all kinds of other things that she has never experienced in her own country. The narcissistic mirror image of Rosa's body is a projection of her repressed sexuality resulting from the oppressive social and political situation. In rejecting her father and her 'desexualised' identity as Burger's daughter (Newman 1988: 75, 77), Rosa is transformed through her new experiences from a political being nurtured in the South African political context into a more private being and a sexual woman. Gordimer thus explores in the location of the South of France the meaning of place and the nature of private life and sensual pleasure in terms of Rosa's quest for a balance between the private and the public.

In the South of France, this exploration of sexual and political body is also mediated by Rosa's lover, Bernard Chabaliere, a French leftist bourgeois who, provides some kind of contrast to her father and represents a different life, different values and different

desires. Rosa experiences a new space and politics that do not confront the same practical problems as Lionel's politics. Chabaliar does not live in a country where you are always required to react to the political situation and make choices about your political stance. Rosa expects her own transformation through Chabaliar, who is 'privately present to her' (313). As his mistress, she is free from any public responsibility or any social commitment: she lives here in 'another order of reality' (313). Her desire to fulfil her private life seems to be satisfied through Chabaliar and decadent sensual pleasure, to the extent that she experiences the passion of love, 'another aspect of joy' (309). This is where, for the first time, Rosa has an erotic personal experience of passion, sexuality, the body, and of another aesthetic world which significantly affects her personality and her sense of individuality. It is also where Gordimer makes a critique of French sensuality.

All that Rosa experiences in France represents possibilities for her sensual awakening. For example, the paintings that Rosa and Chabaliar see in the South of France open up surprises and new pleasures to her, 'a confirmation of the experience running within her': 'These pictures are proof of something. It is the people I'm living among I'm seeing, not the pictures' (286). Thus, through Rosa's experience in France as a private being, the novel describes a sense of sensual pleasure. What she most longs for is the sensual and the erotic achieved within a context of political commitment. She at first thinks she can achieve this with Chabaliar:

I go blindfold in the darkness of sensations I have just experienced, deaf to everything but a long dialectic of body and mind that continues within Bernard Chabaliar and me even when we are not together (300).

However, the narrative suggests at the same time that this is a pleasure devoid of historical events and political implications. It must also be noted that the evocation of sensuality and sexual indulgence has a dual and

paradoxical impact. The erotic is both celebrated and distanced because the purely erotic, devoid of social responsibility, becomes as empty and meaningless to Rosa.

### ***Unreconciled Dialectic***

The crucial element in Rosa's search is the balance between her sexuality and her political perspective. Though she believes she has found this balance in her affair with Chabaliar, the dialectic remains unreconciled and accepted as a dialectic. Thus her sexuality becomes the basis of exploring the contradictions and tensions between her existential quest for a subjective self and the political imperatives imposed upon her. This place in France may open all kinds of sensual possibilities for Rosa which are denied her in her own country, but at the same time it reveals its limitations for her in terms of the void in its historical and political context:

It's as if nothing has ever happened—to them, or anybody. Or is happening. Anywhere. No prisoners in Soviet asylums, no South Africa...no migrant workers living without women just down the road....No past, no future (287).

Either Rosa has no sense of continuity in this European aesthetic world or she cannot accept her own image and identity as purely a sensual woman which is very much created by Katya. Chabaliar's place is France, a place in which Rosa is 'out of place' because for her it 'doesn't fit necessity of reality, here' (235). Attempting to be free, to be herself, Rosa paradoxically finds herself 'like someone in prison,' where everything 'couldn't function' and is 'locked' (222). Her letters to Katya reveal her dilemma: 'There's nothing more private and personal than the life of a mistress, is there?...Bernard Chabaliar's mistress isn't Lionel Burger's daughter; she's certainly not accountable to the Future [of her country]' (304). It is ironic that while Rosa attempts to distance herself from her

father's politics in search of her private self, she cannot fit in the space of a private life devoid of a political and historical context. She is after all a product of her family's political milieu and of her society. Her father's political cause and her family's commitment to social responsibilities are so deeply embedded within her that she cannot discard the political heritage of her father and her relationship to her society. As Noyes argues, the construction of subjectivity in colonial space is closely linked to the contexts and histories of that particular social and cultural space (1992: 65). Although Rosa is physically away from South Africa, everything she is from her consciousness to her inner self has been shaped by her history in that place.

### ***The Politics of Place and Rosa's Compromise***

During her indulgent life in Europe, Rosa's old self is recalled in her former connection to the Burger family. Her black stepbrother, Baasie, which means 'little boss', points to her past as Lionel Burger's daughter. Her encounter with him after twenty years marks a moment that represents the significant change in his relationship to the family. He also plays a crucial role in affecting Rosa's consciousness of herself and hence the course of her journey ahead. He is now in exile in Europe, has changed his identity from Baasie to Zwelinzima Vulindlela, which means 'suffering land'. Rosa meets him at one of the gatherings in London and their subsequent conversation on the phone signifies a total alienation not only between them as individuals but also between South African blacks and whites. This alienation is caused by both the social rupture under apartheid and the complexity of social and political commitment illustrated earlier by the debate in Marisa's township. Zwelinzima's old relationship to the Burger family, from which he disappeared, is now so changed that his complete rejection of the white family changes the whole perception of black/white relations for Rosa. He rejects Rosa as a stepsister: 'I'm not your Baasie, just don't go on thinking about

that little kid who lived with you, don't think of that black "brother"' (321). He also rejects Lionel, his stepfather, claiming that blacks don't need a white hero:

Everyone in the world must be told what a great hero he was and how much he suffered for the blacks. Everyone must cry over him and show his life on television and write in the papers. Listen, there are dozens of our fathers sick and dying like dogs, kicked out of the locations when they can't work any more. Getting old and dying in prison. Killed in prison. It's nothing. I know plenty blacks like Burger. It's nothing, it's us, we must be used to it, it's not going to show on English television (320).

Zwelinzima's perspective calls for an alteration even in Lionel's brand of politics regarding the way in which to relate to black people. He believes, like Dhladhla in the debate in Marisa's township, that blacks are to be liberated through their own sufferings and struggles in which he fiercely rejects the role of white liberals: 'Why do you think you should be different from all the other whites who've been shitting on us ever since they came?' (322) For Rosa, this comment brings to light another dimension of the political dilemma in South Africa. When Zwelinzima says that 'I don't have to live in your head' (323), it is a total rejection of paternalistic white attitudes towards blacks and the position she herself occupies.

The basic positions and roles for white liberals in South African politics are critically defined by Kirsten Holst Petersen:

Politically speaking the liberal position has occupied a space between black and Afrikaaner nationalism, and liberals have tended to act as spokesmen for blacks, playing the role of benevolent paternalists, advocating patience and gradualism on the one hand, and on the other trying to ameliorate the harsh conditions through charity. The combination of a strong sense of moral responsibility with powerlessness has produced in the liberal psyche intense feelings of guilt (1992: 171).

This paternalistic consciousness and its notions of the

roles for white liberals are rejected in the novel by Zwelinzima, who asserts that 'blacks must suffer now', and that their suffering has nothing to do with white liberals like Rosa and her father. Lionel Burger is a deeply committed and intensely self-sacrificing communist but as Gordimer once commented, his 'heroism doesn't fit the liberals' (Bazin and Seymour 1990: 233). Zwelinzima rejects not only white liberals but also white heroes. Rosa's dilemma here is the dilemma of the white liberals who experienced irresolvable conflicts and confronted their rejection by and challenge from blacks. Gordimer says that whites must accept this pain of rejection: 'There is an acceptance by a small minority of whites (much criticised by other liberals) that withdrawal of blacks from whites is necessary for their own identity, that they have to discover themselves. Whites have to accept this. It's painful to accept rejection. A contradiction in terms. But it has to be done' (Ibid.: 94).

*Burger's Daughter* responds to the challenge posed by the Black Consciousness ideology and movement through its examination of the values of white liberals. Black Consciousness, as expressed by Dhladhla and Zwelinzima, rejects the ideal of black/white alliance. It rejects the gesture of white paternalism and seeks more radical commitment to total liberation independent of white liberals. It also wants to go alone in total opposition to white South Africa. Inspired by the Black Consciousness ideology, the black resistance in the 1970s became an enormous challenge not only to the state but also to white sympathisers. The novel indicates that the white tradition of revolution does not match the reality of South African politics. 'The past doesn't count,' Gordimer writes, 'the relic present...doesn't count,' but '*the Future is coming*' (112). Along with her criticism of the inadequacy of white liberalism, Gordimer's support for black liberation achieved by black people is insistently displayed in the novel. The narrative stresses, for example, the achievements of black revolution in neighbouring countries: 'the defeat of the Portuguese

colonial armies in Angola and Mozambique; the collapse of white Rhodesia; the end of South Africa's occupation of Namibia brought about by SWAPO's fighters or international pressure; these are what they are waiting for' (Ibid). The sub-narrative of the political pamphlet entitled 'Soweto Students Representative Council' also points to the independent role played by the young generation in the struggle:

There's no more turning back, we have reached a point of no return as the young generation in this challenging country. We have proved that we are capable of changing the country's laws as youths this we shall pursue until we reach the ultimate goal—UHURU For AZANIA (346).

Gordimer responded to the outcome of the Soweto riots in a speech delivered at the University of Cape Town in 1977. She accepted the blacks' rejection of white liberalism, but argued that whites could find a role in the struggle for black liberation and hence national liberation by seeking a new consciousness and new identity for white South Africans. Her speech reassessed the role of whites in the liberation struggle:

If we declare an intention to identify fully with the struggle for a single, common South African consciousness, if there is such a thing as white consciousness as a way to human justice and honest self-realisation, whites will have to take their attitude apart and assemble afresh their ideas of themselves. We shall have to accept the black premise that the entire stand point of *being white* will have to shift, whether it is under the feet of those who loathe racialism and have opposed it all their lives, or those to whom race discrimination is holy writ (1977: 89).

The narrative of *Burger's Daughter* does not clarify why Rosa has resolved to go back to South Africa after the telephone conversation with Zwelinzima: 'I cannot understand why what *he* had to say and his manner...incensed me so....There's no explanation for how this comes about. Silence' (331). It is, however, evident through the sequence of the novel that the

hostile conversation with Zwelinzima has deeply affected Rosa's decision to change her life: 'why that telephone call in the middle of the night made everything that was possible, impossible' (328). Regarding this, Gordimer says: 'she returns to South Africa because that is *where she believes she is most fully alive*' (1980: 20). She also explains the confrontation between Rosa and Zwelinzima in historical and political terms in South Africa: 'each betrays the relationship of the past in the bitter deterioration of the contemporary situation between black and white which has been their inheritance' (Ibid.). This confrontation with black hostility and its rejection of white liberals is an inevitable step for Rosa because of her present life of irresolution being removed from the place where she belongs. One can also see that this is the moment when Rosa begins with another dialectic because of the black rejection of Lionel's paternalistic conception of the place. Her response to Zwelinzima signifies that she is no longer in her former position as a white liberal, but she has made a compromise to accept a new conception of the place by blacks and new perceptions of their roles and relationships with white South Africans. She thus chooses to return home to commit herself again to the politics of the country 'to accept the black premise that the entire stand point of being *white* will have to shift' (1977: 89).

Gordimer's response to the Black Consciousness movement is demonstrated in Rosa's renewed commitment at the end of the novel to the revolutionary initiative of the young generations of black Africans. It is as if her journey in Europe and her confrontation with her hostile black brother have initiated her return and her recognition of the object of her search. Rosa returns home to be politicised again as a white South African working in the black revolution. She renounces both the political role of being her father's daughter and her existence as a purely sexual being, discarding the image, in Judie Newman's terms, of 'erotic or political iconography' (1988: 83). As an ordinary person rather than a political ideologist, she starts

to work as a physiotherapist in a Johannesburg hospital to help children walk again. She is no longer at the centre of the political struggle in South Africa but rather on its periphery, 'like anyone else'. In her new commitment, Rosa finds real political imperatives not of her father's but of her own. Her image has changed from the earlier static one of a reserved girl to one that is more resolute and animated—a 'livelier' woman in sorority with other women in the struggle. Rosa's resolution and Gordimer's emphasis on practice rather than theory and ideology are clearly expressed in the following passage:

No one can defect.

I don't know the ideology:

It's about suffering.

How to end suffering.

And it ends in suffering. Yes, it's strange to live in a country where there are still heroes. Like anyone else, I do what I can (332).

Towards the end of the story, the novel indicates that Rosa has found a new commitment, working in alliance with her black sisters and children, to the liberation of the country. She is now detained like her parents, alongside other women detainees alleged to have aided the student's revolt: 'these women were in touch with each other, if cut off from the outside world' (356). This ending is where Gordimer for the first time in her fiction creates black/white sisterhood in the liberation struggle. The narrative also emphasises Rosa's new subject position as being in accordance with the roles of children in the liberation movement. Children are described as starting to take revenge on their fathers for their inability to cope with the reality of apartheid. Rosa's interrogation of the efficacy of her father's political ideology ultimately leads to her reconciliation with him when she sees in the challenge of the children the future of South Africa:

Our children and our children's children. The sins of the fathers; at last, the children avenge on the fathers the sins of the fathers. Their children and children's chil-

dren; that was the Future, father, in hands not foreseen....The real revolutionary initiative....This time it's coming from the children of the people, teaching the fathers—the ANC, BPC, PAC, all of them, all the acronyms hastening to claim, to catch up, the theory chasing events (348-49).

It is, however, left unclear as to how she has reached this reconciliation and the acceptance of a destiny similar to her parents': 'I solved nothing but was no longer badgered' (331). Although Rosa comes back to South Africa and commits herself again, the yearning is still there, unresolved. There is a deliberate attempt to make things work which is manifested in the narrative scheme of dialogism and interrogation. This technique allows the novelist to exercise her imagination and address the conflict in order to find a balance between public responsibility and her own private creed, though it may never be fully resolved. As I have argued earlier, the narrative of *Burger's Daughter* sets up a dialogue between several competing ideologies and perspectives, all of which are presented as possibilities and none of which is dominant and authoritative. In this dialectic, the narrative presents different voices, perspectives and discourses but it does not offer a solution to Rosa's tensions and conflicts and they remain unresolved. The inconclusiveness of the protagonist's resolution reflects the lack of unified discourse and dominant perspective in the interrogative novel, described by Belsey:

In other words, the interrogative text refuses a single point of view, however complex and comprehensive, but brings points of view into unresolved collision or contradiction. It therefore refuses the hierarchy of discourses of classic realism, and no authorial or authoritative discourse points to a single position which is the place of the coherence of meaning (1980: 92).

This lack of a single unified voice or a dominant perspective in the narrative reflects not only the difficult condition of South African society where it is difficult to find consensus on moral and social values but also

the particularly transitional situation of South Africa at the time when it was extremely difficult to achieve a single solution, a dominant ideology or a universal view of the world.

At the end of the novel, Rosa engages with radical politics, and becomes involved in a movement that went on to become more racially based advocating exclusive black unity in the rejection of white liberals. From the arguments of Dhladhla and Zwelinzima, we are told that what is needed is black unity and that the white liberal or the white radical may be irrelevant to the stage of opposition that has been reached. At what cost then does Rosa, who is white and female, become an accepted member of a radical oppositional group? Rosa's exile in Europe has been significant especially in terms of her quest for subjectivity because it has given a structure to her dialectic and questioning journey as a chance to locate herself in different perceptions of place and experience and to contemplate what it means to be the self without the history and politics of place. The dialogism and interrogation in her personal journey arise from the polarised visions of place and of the self as a dialectic which Rosa needs to negotiate her own subjectivity. She has discovered in herself the personal potential of sexuality and sensual aesthetics in her sojourn in France. However, she has also realised that, in the place without a historical and political context, it is impossible for her to find a subjective self for herself. Dialogism and the interrogative text have thus made the protagonist's journey possible to accept in the end a new subject position as a white South African in the black revolutionary struggle and a new commitment to the place.

### **Conclusion**

While the narrative of *Burger's Daughter* centres on Rosa's inner struggle and tensions, it also exposes the complex social and political context of South Africa in which radicalism has been defined racially, rejecting white liberalism or any black/white alliance in the

struggle against apartheid. Although Gordimer does not yield any immediate solutions for the social and political problems, her concern seems to be to reawaken white consciousness and to explore new paths for white South Africans and black/white relations in South Africa. Rosa Burger's dilemma in the novel can be read, on one level, as Gordimer's own dilemma as a white writer in South Africa. She creates at the end of *Burger's Daughter* a sisterhood between black and white women who are imprisoned yet still committed to the struggle. She demonstrates here that there should be a part for Rosa, the white woman, to play in the struggle which was becoming excessively racialised into a 'black conscious' movement. This is her own way of negotiating the excessive racialisation of the struggle where, within the radical opposition, race has become the only determinant. Gordimer deals with the issue explicitly in her 1982 lecture, 'Living in the Interregnum':

He [the white writer] has to try to find a way to reconcile the irreconcilable within himself, establish his relation to the culture of a new kind of posited community, non-racial but conceived with and led by blacks.

I have entered into this community with trust and a sense of discovering reality, coming alive in a new way (1989: 278).

Rosa in the novel also finds a new commitment, different to the one imposed on her before. The fact that she comes back and engages herself in radical politics points to Gordimer's belief that there should be a part for white women and that it should be possible to play this part with full rights as a woman, exploring all the possibilities of womanhood and sexuality. Gordimer's politics of place and her exploration of female subjectivity in *Burger's Daughter* demonstrate the need for sexuality to be a part of the subjective self and therefore a part of politics. Rosa's quest anticipates Gordimer's later explorations of sexuality and politics in *A Sport of Nature* (1987) and *None to Accompany Me* (1994) in which female protagonists are

increasingly politicised and radically sexualised.

## Notes

- 1 I regard South Africa under apartheid as still being a colonial society. In *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer writes that 'for whites, South Africa is an advanced capitalist state in the last stage of imperialism; but for blacks it is still a colony' (85). In reality, the colonial situation lingered on throughout the process of social change and modernisation in South Africa until the first democratically elected government came to power in 1994.
- 2 Gordimer became interested in Bram Fischer, one of the most prominent leaders of the South African Communist Party (SACP), in the mid-1960s when she wrote articles on his arrest and trial. However, many of the particulars are changed in her novel. See Gordimer (1966b).
- 3 Concerning black politics in South Africa, see Tom Lodge 1983.
- 4 Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogism' was first presented in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* (first published, 1963) and well explored in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (first published, 1981). Bakhtin provides stylistic analyses of characters' utterances and reveals various ways of transmitting meanings and of framing contexts.
- 5 I have borrowed this idea from Peter Stallybrass who argues that 'the body can itself be a site of conflict' (1986: 123-24) as he observes Bakhtin's model of the opposition between the grotesque body and the classical body. To analyse the social formation of the body, especially the sexual body, is often to investigate the hidden manifestations of submission to the dominant social order because cultural representations of the body are often controlled by the society's politics of class, race, gender and sexuality.
- 6 First published as 'Letter from South Africa', *New York Review of Books*, 23:20, 9 December 1976, 3-10, reprinted in *The Essential Gesture* (1989).
- 7 For discussions of liberalism in South Africa, see Robertson 1971; Michelman 1975; Rich 1984, and Simkins 1986.
- 8 Kunene refers in his essay on 'Journey as Metaphor' to the counter point to home in the hero's journey as 'the place of Foreign Sojourn.' It is the point where the traveller's outward movement ends and the return movement begins.

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