

‘Coloured’ Identity and Cultural Transformation in Nadine Gordimer’s *My Son’s Story*

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*What is socially peripheral is often
symbolically central.* (Babcock 1978: 32)

‘Coloured’ Identity as Deconstruction of Racial Categories

The term ‘coloured’ in the South African context is taken to mean ‘mixed race’, ‘half-breed’, ‘half-caste’ or ‘mulatto’ between white and black ancestors, but this level of meaning as a term of self-definition is extremely controversial. As Gavin Lewis points out, the categorisation ‘coloured’ is an administrative invention, ‘an attempt by the white supremacist state to divide blacks and to preserve white “racial purity” by treating Coloureds as a separate, coherent, and homogeneous “race” apart from both Africans and whites with a few more privileges than the former and much fewer than the latter’ (1987: 3). Clearly, the difficulty of dealing with the issue of ‘coloured’ identity lies in the inadequacy of defining who or what ‘coloured’ people are. The continuous intermingling between ‘coloured’ and white persons to the present day has mixed them up so inextricably that a ‘coloured’ community, Marais argues, ‘as distinct from the European does not exist in any realistic interpretation of the term’ (1957: 283). Yet, white public opinion and the State of South Africa persistently refused to integrate the ‘coloured’ community. In the apartheid era, ‘coloured’ persons as well as black people were segregated from the white community and were discriminated against in most social amenities, public places, educational establishments, occupations, and industries. I use the term in inverted commas to indicate my

disagreement with this white-imposed classification which was rejected by many people placed under it.

Nadine Gordimer’s tenth novel, *My Son’s Story* (1990), deals with ‘coloured’ identity as deconstruction of racial categories and as a site of cultural transformation. The novel revolves around a ‘coloured’ family and a ‘coloured’ narrator. This new narrative voice of a ‘coloured’ boy is different both in colour and gender from her earlier white heroines and enables Gordimer to introduce a symbolically hybrid and cross-cultural force to counter the fixed identities which apartheid structures have put in place in South African society. The focus on the ‘coloured’ family is significant precisely because the hybridity and the instability of the term ‘coloured’ facilitate the kinds of shifts in identity and perception that the narrative envisages. Here, the symbolism of ‘coloured’ as a racial classification becomes particularly important. Its instability and fluidity as a racial category suggest that Gordimer is experimenting with the possibility of transformation in the racial order that permeates all personal, gender and sexual relations in South Africa.

The race classifications and definitions in the legislation of South Africa applied inconsistent and sometimes contradictory definitions of what ‘coloured’ is or is not. The Population Registration Act of 1950 defines ‘coloured’ as ‘a person who is not a white person or a native’ (February, 1981: 192). In 1967, Proclamation 123 divided ‘coloured’ people further into seven different categories: Cape Coloured, Malay, Griqua, Chinese, Indian, other Asiatic, and other Coloured (Ibid.). The biological as well as cultural heterogeneities among ‘coloured’

people are immense due to the continuous process of infiltration and amalgamation between white and 'coloured' populations, but the legislative definitions arbitrarily rested on physical appearance or resorted to general acceptance and repute and facilitated the white control of the non-European population by dividing it into population groups.

Historical investigations into the ethnic origins of 'coloured' people²⁾ display a further difficulty in defining the term because of ethnic, cultural and biological diversities. It is known that the people described as 'coloureds' had appeared very early on after the first settlers arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. Francois Valentyn (1971) traces their ethnic origins and describes the enormous diversity of ethnic components in the Cape at the beginning of the eighteenth century. These people of mixed origin ranged from impoverished rural proletariat to skilled artisans. Their ancestors included indigenous Khoisan peoples and slaves from Madagascar, Mozambique and West Africa. Those of Asian origin included Indonesian political exiles as well as slaves from the sphere of the Dutch East India Company's influence in the East, such as India, Ceylon and Malaya. The offspring of white-slave unions mostly remained slaves, while those of white-Khoisan descent tended to be absorbed into the ranks of the free people in the Cape. In the Cape Colony in the late nineteenth century, 'there had always been considerable cohabitation across the colour line', writes Leonard Thompson, 'and the Afrikaner community had incorporated many individuals of mixed descent' (1990: 66). However, Afrikaner race consciousness was strong enough to limit that process of incorporation and the white rulers of the Cape Colony treated the 'coloured' people as a distinct and inferior community.

The history of 'coloured' political movements is so complex that their social position within the South African racial hierarchy is extremely complicated. On the one hand, their situation was marginalised in

many ways. For example, the political segregation of 'coloured' voters and compulsory residential segregation in the towns of the Cape Province were great obstacles prohibiting 'coloured' advancement into white society. On the other hand, in spite of their marginalised situation, the concentration of 'coloureds' in the Cape Province and the fact that they form the majority in Cape Town gave them a security of numbers and hence political powers.²⁾ 'Coloured' political organisations, such as the African Political Organisation (APO), had a great impact on the political mobilisation of opposition groups, although they appealed specifically to the 'coloured' population for support and their activities were restricted to 'coloured' people.³⁾

In spite of the problematic nature of a 'coloured' identity and its function as an imposed identity, the category was adopted by some of the elite and political and cultural organisations of the 'coloured' communities as a means to advance their own interest as a group. There were, for example, 'coloured' organisations in whose interest it was to demand integration into white society. Van der Ross, who is a 'coloured' professor and a prominent political figure in the history of 'coloured' politics, argues against 'the myth of Coloured identity,'⁴⁾ that the 'coloureds' and the whites share the same culture and the only difference between them is economic rather than cultural (1971: 332). Elsewhere, he stresses that the lifestyle of many 'coloured' people belongs to the sub-culture of the poor whites and therefore they should receive the same political advantages and governmental assistance:

The life-style of many Coloured people who appear to live "differently" and, therefore, to have a "different culture", actually only portrays a sub-division or "underclass" of the same culture as that followed by "Western culture" people. Just as the Poor Whites of the 1920s and 1930s grew out of

their condition of poverty, and out of the sub-culture, so those Coloured people who are in the sub-culture of poverty can also be assisted. (1979: 37)

Van der Ross and many people described as 'coloureds' thus assert affinity and union between the 'coloured' and white communities. 'Coloured' identity is thus as much a political and instrumental concept, as it is a biological one, in the history of 'coloured' politics, whereby 'coloured' political organisations tried to seek either black political mobilisation or serve their own interests in collaboration with whites rather than with black Africans.

The difficulties in the 'coloured'/white relationship and the problematics of the position of 'coloured' people lie in the very proportion of 'whiteness' in 'coloured' identity. V. A. February explains, for example, what 'play whites' means in the South African context:

Since colour plays such an important role in South Africa, some 'coloureds' often try to cross the colour line and pass themselves off as whites. They are generally referred to as 'play whites' or people who are 'trying for white'. (1981: 198)

Granted a few more privileges than blacks but still no equality with whites, the position of 'coloured' people was highly problematic and difficult. Shiva Naipaul wrote of the complex position of 'coloureds' in South African society: 'To survive these days you had to be either black or white. It was no good being brown. No good at all.'⁵¹ It is within these tensions, contradictions and ambiguities surrounding the issue of 'coloured' identity that Gordimer explores, through the 'coloured' narrative, the possibilities of social, political and cultural transformation in South Africa.

Given the generations of intermixing between the 'coloured' and white populations and the vast heterogeneity of physical types and cultural practices among 'coloured' people, it is extremely problematic to define what a 'coloured' person is. In *My Son's Story*, Gordimer describes this problematic nature of 'coloured' identity as:

Not defined—and it was this lack of definition in itself that was never to be questioned, but observed like a taboo, something which no-one, while following, ever could admit to. (21-22)

The 'coloured' boy's narrative expresses his deep consciousness of 'coloured' identity as a self divided between white and black blood, which demonstrates the ambivalent condition of 'coloured' people in the country. The boy's malediction over the black pigment in his veins manifests the tensions surrounding 'coloured' identity:

It was because of *them* whose pigment darkened the blood, procreated a murky dilution in the veins of the white town, disowned by the white town, that the community was disqualified....With that strain of pigment went more interdictions, a passbook to be produced tremblingly before policemen, dirtier work, even poorer places to live and die in. Better to keep them at a distance, not recognize any feature in them. And yet they were useful; the self that recognized something of itself in the franchised of the town inherited along with that resemblance the town's assumption that blacks were there to do things that you didn't want to do, that were beneath your station; for nothing was beneath theirs. (22)

A similar framework of the 'coloured' consciousness of 'black blood' is presented in Gordimer's short story, 'A Chip of Glass Ruby' in *Not for Publication* (1965). The 'coloured' schoolteacher, Petersen, ridicules the schoolboy, Jimmy, in front of the class about his Indian mother, Zanip, who works for the black campaign against passes: "You see this boy? His mother's in jail because she likes the natives very much. She wants the Indians to be the same as natives" (Gordimer 1983: 271). To Petersen, 'it's his black blood that's brought him trouble all his life.' It is, therefore, a threat for him to be the same as black Africans because equality takes away from him 'his bit of whiteness that's all he's got' (Ibid.: 271-72). Thus, Gordimer's 'coloured' protagonists express the tensions and contradictions of their undefinable 'coloured' identity caught between the two bloods.

In *My Son's Story*, the 'coloured' schoolteacher, Sonny, and his family are located in a position of ambivalence because they are more advantaged than blacks because of their share of 'white blood' but are not equal to whites. The novel describes their circumscribed position as 'coloureds' marginalised from white society:

As some lordly wild animal marks the boundaries of his hunting and mating ground which no other may cross, it was as if the municipality left some warning odour, scent of immutable authority, where the Saturday people were not to transgress. And they read the scent; they recognized it always, it had always been there....The lover of Shakespeare never had the right to enter the municipal library and so did not so much as think about it. (12)

This peculiar situation of the 'coloured' family, who are advantaged yet segregated from the opportunities enjoyed by whites, creates a particular impact on

their disparate experiences and racial consciousness. According to Linda Weinhouse, because he is 'coloured' rather than black, Sonny 'has the option of striving for white acceptance or rejecting it' (1993: 68).

Sonny's sense of identity is characterised by its 'unbelongingness' and he is situated 'halfway between' (21) the 'real blacks' on the one side of the veld and the whites on the other. He is in a position in which he can communicate with both communities, albeit in rather different and unbalanced ways because the 'coloured' community comes from the white town and the blacks are removed from the 'coloured' community. Sonny isolates himself from cultural events as well as political activities. In spite of his sense of responsibility and his admiration for the real blacks, Sonny's sense of equality does not involve him in the liberation movement before the school uprisings but lets him view it from a 'spectator status' as 'more their affair' (23) not as his own.

Gordimer's conception of pigment in racial terms acts as a stronger connecting force that identifies 'coloureds' and 'real blacks' as siblings. In establishing Sonny's distinctive character, Gordimer portrays his dark skin colour as a positive factor: 'In spite of the fact that he had turned out darker- rather than lighter-skinned than the rest of the family— something that, normally, might have down-graded him' (6), Sonny is 'black enough to be a spokesman of the people, either in terms of his skin or his action' (112). His dark skin is recognized as the 'usefulness' that 'in contrast with the lighter colouring of most of his kind, surely helped reduce superficial differences between those who were entirely black and those who had something of the white man in their vein' (33). Gordimer thus registers 'coloured' identity as an advantage in political terms.

The term 'coloureds' also came to be used to refer to people categorised as blacks. This was a post-Soweto phenomenon which was very much

influenced by the ideology of the Black Consciousness movement, which declared that all those oppressed by white racism should unite. Steve Biko, a leader of the movement, wrote in *I Write What I Like*:

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 subjection—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. (1978: 49)

Gordimer's concept of blacks and 'coloureds' as siblings in *My Son's Story* (26) corresponds to this discourse of Black Consciousness, as it relates to black mobilisation. The narrative describes Sonny's racial identity as black, especially when he faces the black uprisings at schools, and blurs the distinction between 'real black', 'black' and 'coloured'. In defining the real blacks as siblings of the 'coloureds', the novel underlines 'black solidarity' (27) as a focus of political mobilisation in the liberation movement. In this sense, the strength of the passage rests on its function in creating dual interpretations of the term 'coloured':

When did distinction between black and real black, between himself and them, fade, for the schoolteacher? That ringing in the air, 'equality' beginning to be heard as 'freedom'—it happened without specific awareness, a recognition of what really had been there to understand, all the time....Why should they not be learning something about themselves, for themselves by mimicking the responsibilities recognized by certain other children—their siblings. To recognize the

real blacks as siblings....They determined to march across the veld to show solidarity with the children who had been locked out of their school by the police, after a boycott of classes; black solidarity. (25-27)

On one level, this passage identifies 'coloured' with black in the Black Consciousness philosophy of black mobilisation. On another level, it is a deliberate deconstruction of both black and 'coloured' as fixed identities.

The 'Coloured' Family as the Interstice between White Community and Black Location

Gordimer's focus on the 'coloured' family in *My Son's Story* is part of her thematic preoccupation with the politics of race, gender and sexuality as they are played out in the family and the wider public arena. Crucial in this novel are the possibilities of hybridity and the fluidity of the historical conditions of 'coloured' people. Their 'in-betweenness', 'unbelongingness', 'ambivalence' and 'doubleness' invest them with the kind of transforming possibilities that Homi Bhabha has identified in *The Location of Culture* (1994):

This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy....'Beyond' signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary—the very act of going *beyond*—are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the 'present' which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced. (4)

These possibilities have in fact been recognised in

historical studies on ethnicity in recent years that observe 'the changing multiple identities' of South Africans and the 'changing images of their communities and of their society' (Bekker 1993: 2). Gavin Lewis also points out that ethnicity is not something static but 'a changing social process, serving important psychological and emotional needs by instilling a sense of self-worth and belonging' (1987: 4). Chandramohan argues in *A Study in Trans-ethnicity in Modern South Africa* that, because of the peculiar situation that 'coloureds' in South Africa have historically confronted, they have faced the option of asserting 'their group identity within the racial hierarchy of South Africa' or developing a 'trans-ethnic identity for all South Africans within which they could find an equal place' (1992: 190). *My Son's Story* is much concerned with such forms of ethnic identity that transgress boundaries, that is, the 'trans-ethnic identity' of 'coloured' people with their 'in-betweenness', 'ambiguity', 'doubleness' and 'transformation'. The flux of the 'coloured' family in the novel, especially the 'coloured' wife Aila's interstitial position as a 'coloured' woman between different cultural identifications, can be discussed within the framework provided by Bhabha who celebrates the possibility of cultural hybridity and its dynamic power. The idea of 'coloured' as an unstable definition thus facilitates the possibility of cultural transformation in Gordimer's imaginative writing.

The 'coloured' family in *My Son's Story* makes the symbolic move of crossing the border from the 'coloured' location in their hometown to a 'grey area' (14) in the white city of Johannesburg from where working class Afrikaners move out for a higher grade of life. The family is offered a house by the committee to settle in among whites as a gesture in defiance of the law of the Group Areas Act. This move of the 'coloured' family into the grey area of the white city signifies the whole notion of 'coloured' identity as hybrid, in-between, fluid and transgressive. Inhabiting the interstice between the

white community and the black location across the veld, they move beyond the barriers of colour and attempt to transgress the bounds of social and cultural space in their resistance to segregation.

This move into the white city also signals the beginning of the uncertain movement of the family in the novel. This transfer is seen by Sonny's son, Will, as their uprooting and the beginning of the family's dislocation initiated by Sonny. Sonny's active involvement in politics after school uprisings results in his leading the family into a grey area of South African politics in which their future is unforeseeable:

A changing vocabulary was accompanying the transformation of Sonny to 'Sonny' the political personality....She knew he was leading her into a different life, patiently, step by step neither he nor she was sure she could follow....As he deserted this, he realized that a certain shelter was being given up, for the family. Shabby, degrading shelter—but nevertheless. He himself had the strength of a mission to arm him; his family—Aila—it would be different for them. (39-41)

In its borderline situation, the 'coloured' family's movement signifies the flux of ambivalence into the future of unpredictable ambiguities. In Gordimer's attempt at relocating 'coloured' identity, the family's cultural mixture and non-categoriness evolve into new meanings and new subjectivities.

In the ambiguous experiences of the 'coloured' family in the novel, we can read the uncertainty of South Africa's political realities and their historical shift in the 1980s, the period which Gordimer has called 'the interregnum' (1989a). In her 1982 lecture, 'Living in the Interregnum', she remarked that, 'historical co-ordinates don't fit life any longer' and, quoting Gramsci, she said, 'in this interregnum, I and all my country men and women are living' (Ibid.:

263). Through the decades of political turmoil and cultural 'interregnum', South African fiction became a means of searching for a new social order. Indeed, Clingman has identified a significant shift in the flow of the history of South African literature in the 1980s: 'now it seems South African literature has a new obsession: it is preoccupied with issues of the *future*' (1990: 43). Gordimer's fiction, especially since *The Conservationist* (1974), certainly demonstrates her concerns with the future of the country, dealing with a highly unpredictable phase of South African history. In both *Burger's Daughter* (1979) and *July's People* (1981), she describes the scenes of imminent revolution in South Africa. This preoccupation with issues of the future coincides with her engagement with increasingly radicalised political themes in her writing. Her primary interest in the lives of individuals is now more incorporated into political themes and the modes of social change.

In the late 1980s, the world confronted the implications of what was happening in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union in 1989. In February 1990, the year in which *My Son's Story* was published, Nelson Mandela was released from life imprisonment. Gordimer's awareness of historical change both in Eastern Europe and in South Africa is evident in the book, especially in Sonny's preoccupation with the parallel between the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and political fluctuations in South Africa. Gordimer argues through Sonny's voice: 'The twentieth's thinking is the past. Finished. We'll take the best of it and move on....Here and outside, negotiations go on on the basis that the world's changed' (213-14). Gordimer thus underlines the inadequacy of the old principles and old means and emphasises the need for 'new understanding of our human needs' and of the acceptance of 'new realities' (213). In this way, a new assessment of South African experiences can be made which could lead to liberation in the new era. Gordimer thus presents in her novel a renewed

commitment to political struggle and social change.

It is not surprising that, in this climate, Gordimer's fiction became increasingly preoccupied with the future and with demonstrating a more revolutionary approach to social change.⁶ Her use of the 'coloured' family and the 'coloured' narrator can be called, in Clingman's terms, 'a symbolic choice of narrative identity, representing some identification on Gordimer's part with a new and developing world' (1993: xxvii). Gordimer suggests the potential of the 'coloured' family and her writing as moving beyond the present flux, although the results are unforeseeable, as the future of South Africa is unpredictable. The various transformations of the family suggest to us the possibility of re-inventing it, locating it outside the apartheid creed and making it reflect a sensitive awareness of a just, equal and humane society.

The manifold associations that Gordimer creates around 'coloured' protagonists as well as the dynamic transformations within the 'coloured' family push the conventional 'coloured' identity into broader meanings. The dual strands of narration (omniscient narrative voice and the 'coloured' son's narrative) together with the intersection of multiple stories create varying perspectives from which the novel's action may be seen. The force of this dialogism moves the discourse away from what Homi Bhabha calls the 'singularities' of race, class and gender, and opens up wider spaces for new subjectivities:

The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions—of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation—that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of ordinary and initial

subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (1994: 1-2)

In Gordimer's writing of this period of instability in South African politics, it becomes more and more urgent to explore a new order of community. The dialogic narrative therefore becomes important in the novel in which all certainties are suspect and no single discourse or perspective is privileged. All ambiguities are brought into question and negotiated through the 'coloured' boy's narrative from different perspectives.

The 'Coloured' Family as Locus of Cultural and Political Transformation

Transformations within the 'coloured' family are perceived from both the level of the omniscient narrator and the son's narrative. From the point at which the son learns of his father's affair with a white woman, Hannah, the whole story starts to evolve around the deceptiveness of the appearances of the family's life. Bakhtin's observation on Dostoevsky's novels is also relevant here: 'Where consciousness began, there dialogue began for him as well' (1984: 40). The novel's dialogic narrative explores ambiguous areas of the family's life, revealing unexpected developments and shifts in relationships around the family as if to confirm the narrator's statement that 'nothing is simple in a life and a country where conflict breaks up all consistency of character' (193). The 'coloured' boy's perspective within the family seems to be symbolic of 'coloured' identity in the country as interstitial, not-defined and

ambivalent. The ambiguity of his perspective manifests his position within the family as an inside outsider, in the know but not-knowing.

The narrative also demonstrates the dual meanings of events and perspectives. Will's narrative is necessitated by his father's secret life as he indicates in the final lines of the novel: 'what he did—my father—made me a writer' (277). The boy describes his position within the family and his task as a witness and a writer of the family's story. Writing his family story becomes a process of freeing himself from his bondage to his father and from his present conundrums. Gordimer certainly demonstrates here some identification with the boy in terms of the position she is placed in within South Africa and the task she has taken up as a witness and a writer: 'I was excluded from that, it didn't suit them for me to have any function within it, but I'm going to be the one to record, someday, what he and my mother/Aila and Baby and the others did, what it really was like to live a life determined by the struggle to be free' (276). Consequently, we are given two vantage points from which to perceive and judge the father's affair with Hannah: The objective narrative and the son's narrative, coloured by his own biases and conflicts. On one hand, the son's narrative reflects his peculiar position in the know of his father's secret and yet excluded from the mystery of his father's relationship and his political involvement. The boy's narrative indicates its deceptiveness as he observes his parents' double life:

In our story, like all stories, I've made up what I wasn't there to experience myself... I've imagined, out of their deception, the frustration of my absence, the pain of knowing them too well, what others would be doing, saying and feeling in the gaps between my witness. (275-76)

His dialogic narrative illuminates, on the one hand,

the surface of the family's life, and his deceptive narrative disguises, on the other, the ambiguous movements of the family in a state of flux as a manifestation of the uncertain conditions of the country. His dialogue is with himself, a self divided between father and mother, who at once accepts and rejects his father in the youthful process of self-definition. He also enters into dialogue with the past experience of his family and thus scrutinises the present uncertainty within the split family. The narrative thus renders his dialogue contradictory and unreliable reflecting his internal conflicts and the external deceptiveness of his parents' lives.

The impasse within the family caused by Sonny's affair is overcome when his beloved daughter, Baby, cuts her wrists because of her suffering over her father's relationship with Hannah. Baby is virtually silent throughout the novel and her internal as well as external life is mediated through Will's views. It is not known until a later stage of the novel that Baby is involved in the liberation movement. What prompts her, after her suicide attempt, to leave home and join the Freedom Fighters remains unknown throughout the novel. This dramatic change in her life affects her mother's life and transforms her into a revolutionary. Aila's internal world is also almost invisible to the reader, and it is again mostly mediated through the narrator's viewpoint. After Will discovers that Aila knows about Sonny's secret, the narrative speculates about her internal world from the appearance of external changes in her life. Because of Will's peculiar position, excluded and included as an outside insider within the family, the narrative provides the reader with ambiguous and unreliable accounts of the new lives of Aila and Baby. Will's deceptive narrative thus creates a tension between appearances of events and the true meanings behind them revealed in later reconstructions, which intensifies the reader's realisation: 'That truth is not all the truth' (124).

As a group classified as non-white in apartheid society, the 'coloureds' have a history of apathy which has been the focus of delineation in South African writing, especially in the work of the 'coloured' novelist, Alex La Guma. He has grappled with this phenomenon in *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and in *And a Threefold Cord* (1966). Whereas these novels are focused on the growth of political commitment in individual characters, *My Son's Story* makes the political commitment of the 'coloured' protagonist a dynamic force of transformation in the whole family. This perspective on the dynamic effect of political commitment is central to Gordimer's work of this period. It is in exploring the processes of this transformation that the multiple narratives demonstrate its nuances. Thus, the novel explores the central story of the 'coloured' family's growth towards political commitment and revolutionary movements.

The Parallel between Political Struggle and Sexual Commitment

In *My Son's Story*, politics centres on both male and female bodies, and politics itself is sexualised in the sense that politics and sexuality are solidly interlocked in the South African political context. The parallel between the commitment to political struggle and the fascination of sexual love is set up in Sonny's relationship with the human rights activist, Hannah. After his two-year imprisonment, Hannah becomes for Sonny a new meaning of life, the locus of his commitment to political struggle and sexual pleasure: 'In her—needing Hannah—sexual happiness and political commitment were one' (125). Both Sonny and Hannah represent this interlocking point of politics and sexuality in the South African context: 'South Africa is a centripetal force that draws people,' the novel claims, 'not only out of economic necessity, but also out of the fascination of commitment to political struggle' (88). The

intersecting point of Sonny's political causes and his relationships with women is the locus where he verifies his power and virility. The boy's narrative focuses on his father's masculine, paternal image combined with sexual power: 'All the while he was triumphant in his vitality and virility' (264); 'only too strong and healthy, a fucker' (77). Sonny who is thus characterised by his prominence in both terms of political and sexual power embodies Gordimer's concern with the relationship of masculine sexuality to political power. His integrity as a political leader developed through his political commitment and his sexual power make him more attractive to his lover. To Hannah, the contradiction of being his lover and of being a confidante of his family is overridden by the fascination of sexual love, which 'has the matchless advantage of the flesh as reassurance for anything, everything, for the moment. The body speaks and all is silenced' (92).

The interface between politics and sexuality is also explored through the novel's parallel view of Sonny's clandestine relationship with Hannah and his underground political movement. Both his political activity and his affair go underground because of the political circumstances and the particular nature of their relationship as both lovers and comrades: 'The most precious aspect of his new life with Hannah was that it was clandestine. Like underground political life, it had nothing to do with the everyday' (69-70). The secrecy of their illicit love and that of underground politics are where the euphoria of love and that of political commitment spring from because both of them are transgressions of moral and political codes. Under the particular political circumstances of the country, his double life of underground politics and his clandestine affair are defined as being 'formed in a special and different morality: the excruciating recasting of the meaning of love in the struggle' (127). Their dedication to political struggle and their concentration on the ecstatic love affair mutually intensify their passion.

These transgressions in this interracial love affair make a marked contrast to those in *A Sport of Nature* (1987) where the Jewish woman Hillela's involvement in sexual and political relationships with black men becomes a revolutionary drive which leads South Africa to national liberation. While Hillela's sexual transgression energises her political advancement, which consequently affects the liberation of African countries, Sonny's clandestine relationship with Hannah and his underground political activity do not come to any fruition in the end. In spite of the implications of transformation and energy in their clandestine commitments to love and politics, their transgression of moral code in their illicit love does not suggest any political possibilities in South Africa.

In Sonny's case, there is a suggestion of the masculine ego in his obsessive concern with his virility. There is a hint of what Elaine Fido terms 'the masculine illusion that sexual potency makes a man more effective as a public figure' (1990: 99). It is possible to argue that while Sonny's body becomes the site for exploring the relationship between sexual expression and political struggle, it is also the tool for exploring the social realities of conflict in South Africa and it functions particularly as a symbolic delineation of shifts in gender expectation within the family. Thus, in contrast to his elation and his virile image in his affair with Hannah, Sonny's sexual body is disfigured in his relationship with his wife, Aila. When he tries to have sex with her, his body responds to his duplicitous act with the horrible collapse of his sexual potency:

He trembled with sorrow and disgust at himself after he withdrew from her body... The act drained him, in shame. Sometimes he felt a final spurt of anger, towards Aila, sperm turned to venom. (69)

The scene represents the complete downfall of his

sexuality as he is miserably deserted by his orgasm, and this breakdown of his sexuality in domestic love also signifies the turn in his relationship with Aila, the shift in his position within the family and the beginning of Aila's new sense of self-perception.

Women's Political Roles and Gender Transformation

In exploring the triadic relationship between Sonny, Aila, and Hannah, the novel searches for possible political roles for women under and even beyond apartheid. In Sonny's political transformation, there is a suggestion that his interracial relationship with Hannah helps to propel and enhance the political involvement of the 'coloured' wife, Aila, and her daughter, Baby. The former apolitical schoolteacher becomes involved in liberation struggle initiated by the school children's involvement in uprisings. His interracial love affair creates within the family uncertainties, doubts, agonies and despairs which transform the relationship of the family. Sonny's political movement also leads the family to the gray area of politics as symbolised in their moving into the white suburbs as a political gesture of transgression. His political transformation enhanced by his relationship with Hannah creates within the family a dynamic force of transgression of moral and political codes which inevitably affects other members of the family. Aila and her daughter thus acquire the energy of transformation released in this trans-racial relationship, eventually transcending themselves the boundaries of gender and politics. Aila becomes empowered in both domains of gender and politics while Sonny ironically loses in the end any practical power of politics, gender and even sexual power. The 'coloured' women thus free themselves from the traditional gender perceptions within the family.

Aila, who represents the traditional gender identity as a dependent wife and caring mother, emerges with her new identity later in the novel

when she takes on an undercover role as a revolutionary. Through this experience of political struggle, she transcends the past, and, without losing her old identity, she achieves a new cultural identity combining the old and new, the conventional and the subversive. She accepts a new role to mediate between the domestic space and the world of political exile; between the private and the public.

The emergence of Aila's new subjectivity is located in another grey area of the Oedipal triangle between mother, father and son. From the point when the silent complicity between Sonny and Will starts over Sonny's secret affair, the novel registers a strange space emerging around Aila, which distances both male characters from her: 'Only, because of what I was in with, with him, and so afraid of—for her—there seemed to be some kind of space around her that kept us off—him and me—and that I held my breath for fear of entering' (59). Will's narrative describes the outer changes in Aila's life when she becomes more active and more independent of Sonny. His interpretation of her change reveals his limited view of both his mother's internal and external worlds, which she now inhabits on new terms. Because of Will's deceptive narrative, Aila's involvement in the political struggle is invisible to the reader until later, when it is revealed by the Security Police that a cache of arms was hidden in the storeroom of their house. Her political engagement is entirely independent of her husband and her son, and the narrative displays their complete isolation from Aila's new commitment:

My father looked up all around, wanting to know from somewhere—from me, because I was there, I was always there at home, her boy, mother's boy, how it happened? When? Where did my mother learn these things? How, without his having noticed it, had she come to kinds of knowledge that were not for her? And what was it she

knew? Whom did she know whose names she couldn't reveal? What was Aila doing, all those months, without him? (222)

After the revelation of Aila's hidden role, the authorial voice decodes the real meanings of the activities in her new life. The boy's narrative also recontextualises the change in her life and reveals how Aila has been engaged in the liberation movement with her daughter, Baby. The boy's narrative also describes the emergence of her new identity as a political being as 'her new avatar' (225). During his first visit to Aila in court, Will sees in her familiar face 'a vivid strangeness':

It was as if some chosen experience had seen in her, as a painter will in his subject, what she was, what was there to be discovered. In Lusaka, in secret, in prison—who knows where—she had sat for her hidden face. They had to recognize her. (230)

Aila's transformation is manifested in her new kind of stillness. The strange space around her embodies her new world in which she has achieved a new subject position:

Aila emanated a stilling atmosphere; the parting jabber stopped. It was as if everyone found he had unnoticingly entered a strange house, and it was hers; she stood there. (249)

The invisible transformations of the female characters, Aila and Baby, into revolutionaries may represent the ambiguous area of South African political struggle in the 1980s. The significant connection between Gordimer's project in *My Son's Story* and the political climate at the time can be explained by looking at the development of liberation

movements and state oppression in the modern history of apartheid South Africa. After the Sharpeville killings in 1960, opposition movements were outlawed. Since the uprisings of the 1970s and the banning of the Communist Party and other political organisations and activists, most of the political forces of opposition went underground or into exile. Political leaders started reconsidering their strategies of resistance. The movements of the opposition became invisible from the surface of the political scene. They also became more violent and subversive due to the realisation on the part of opposition leaders of the inadequacy of non-violent measures to meet brutal and escalated state suppression.

The political climate of the time is symbolically embodied in the shift of Aila's position from the domestic space into the more clandestine and radical space of the resistance. In the guise of a stay-at-home wife and innocent mother, Aila now takes on a more tactical and subversive role as a revolutionary. She distances herself from both her husband and son, to whom her involvement in the political struggle has been invisible. Aila emerges now as a strange and almost new presence for Sonny and Will. She is so beyond their powers of perception that the ambiguous motivation for her political involvement and her invisible role in political activity are all a mystery to them: 'Difficult to follow you, Aila. You leave so much out' (241). The novel creates in Aila autonomy totally independent of Sonny's power or political engagement, and this is where one can see a marked reversal of authority between Sonny and Aila.

More positive and more subversive female subjects replace the stereotypical image of black women who are doubly marginalised by colonialism and patriarchy in the South African context. Gordimer seeks to break down in Aila the common victimisation of women in creating a new hybrid identity of a racial and cultural mix. She is now represented in political terms as a 'revolutionary', a

'hero' and a 'comrade'. Once marginalised and silenced, she now comes to the centre of both the family life and the political scene, achieving new roles and new authority in both the politics of the family and of revolution.

Black women in Gordimer's previous works are provided with little political means since silence is their typical mode of presence in their isolated position. While her white heroines develop a political consciousness and achieve political power, the black women are deprived of their voice and remain marginalised as outsiders. In *A Sport of Nature*, for example, the white heroine, Hillela, liberates herself sexually in the process of empowering herself. In this process of liberation, her dialogue with black male characters totally silences the black women, and the dialectic of sexual and political freedom in the white female character renders the black female irrelevant. Aila in *My Son's Story*, on the other hand, achieves her new role as a secret political agent behind the foregrounded sexual and political relationships between her husband and his white lover. Her tactical silence is clearly differentiated from her earlier lack of message or communication. In her new situation, her silence is invested with different meanings and methods of negotiation. It points to new political codes within both the family and the struggle.

In contrast to the emergence of Aila's autonomous subjectivity and her new authority, Sonny's masculine identity is drastically overturned; so much so that his influence over the family is undermined. Aila's radical change achieves a sharper focus through the contrast with Sonny's loss of control within the family. His declining paternal authority is perceived by Will as his father having 'no hand in enriching my life (as he would think of it) anymore' (151). While Aila's identity and her roles are transformed, Sonny fails to accommodate himself to the new situation and to the new relations within the family: 'The presence of the boy makes

everything he [Sonny] says fatuous; the moment the boy's mother is back he withdraws again from any male understanding' (169). Gordimer sets up here her characteristic female dominance⁷ in both terrains of politics and gender, demonstrating a subversive reversal of power relations between Sonny and Aila. Sonny's early powerful and masculine image is considerably overshadowed:

A tide wearing away a coastline, little by little, falling into the ocean of time. They fall away, one by one, lovers, the clinging arms of the children, the memory of when life was unthinkable without them. Fifty-two. And all the while he was triumphant in his vitality and virility, apparently unaffected by his forty-something years, this decay was taking place. (264)

Alongside his loss of paternal gender authority, Sonny's power over women is profoundly reduced. His isolation becomes perceptible in the space he shares with Hannah in the cottage. His internal sense of isolation is externalised through the portrayal of the cottage, previously the space of sensuous closeness, as suddenly becoming 'blurred' like 'obscuring' (143) shadows. Sonny's alienation manifests itself on his body and its sensuality:

He becomes aware on the very surface of his skin, his bare breast and arms, as well as through sight and smell....What was sensuously close drew suddenly away; he was removed from it and the isolation of his presence offered its meaning. (142-43)

In the cottage, in a rich white man's domain, as well as in his home, Sonny is now deprived of his place. He loses his sense of presence, withdrawing as if there is no longer any inhabitable space for him. His mood is highlighted by his overwhelming sense of

loss and isolation in both the worlds he formerly shared with Aila and Hannah.

Sonny's life arrives at this state of total displacement both in his personal space and in his political leadership: 'He suddenly felt all life and will leaving him. All at once' (172). Sonny is marginalised from the centre of political activism, as from his familial place. He also loses Hannah who leaves him to become the United Nations High Commission's Regional Representative. The former euphoria of his personal and political life is reduced to a sense of sheer disintegration:

The construction he had skilfully made of his life was uninhabitable, his categories were useless, nothing fitted his need. *Needing Hannah*. His attraction to Hannah belonged to the distorted place and time in which they—all of them—he, Aila, Hannah, lived. (241)

In the same way that old paradigms no longer fit new political situations, the former construction of his life on his 'freak displacement' (241) no longer fits the new reality of the 'coloured' family. Sonny represents now the uselessness of old commitment to both public and private lives.

The narrative describes Sonny's difficulty in accepting a new perception of Aila and in accommodating himself to new terms with her: 'He knew he was having difficulty in accepting Aila as a comrade' (257). Gordimer seems to be saying that, if there is a way for Sonny to reunite himself with Aila in a life determined by the struggle to be free in the apartheid society, it will be possible only when he accepts her as a political partner: 'Reason told him that if he could accept Aila as a comrade like any other, as well as his wife, they might revive and deepen the old Sonny/Aila life together' (258).

While Hannah, Aila and Baby find a new direction and new approach to their lives, Sonny

loses almost all his sense of life and power. When Aila finally disappears into exile, her performance of her political mission is glorified: 'her name would be honoured, from now on, in the movement inside and outside the country—where she could still be active' (262). By contrast, Sonny does not count any more, ironically not even to the police, as he no longer represents any particular danger to them. He is now displaced by his son in both domains of politics and sexuality. Will's early view that 'in politics as with everything else: you have your day' (185) corresponds to his remark at the end of the novel that *his time* has come:

'Sonny is not the man he was'; someone has said that to me: his comrades think it's because Aila's gone. But I'm young and it's my time that's come, with women. My time that's coming with politics. (276)

The novel presents some efforts on Sonny's part to spend more time at home trying to mend his relationships with his son and his wife. It is ironic that Aila, now imprisoned, becomes liberated as an independent being from her old self: 'She was in prison and she was free, free of him, free of me' (223). She later goes into exile in political alliance with her daughter: 'Baby has made her what Baby wanted *her* to be' (232). Gordimer obviously creates the ironic reversal of gender roles between male and female within the family by placing them on opposite sides of their home, father and son inside and mother and daughter outside. Gordimer's former mother/daughter confrontation in the mother's house in *The Lying Days* is now relocated in more politicised circumstances with a greater union between mother and daughter. She provides us here with a positive sense of female identity which is more transcendental, more active and independent of male authority.

Aila, having transcended the bounds of her old

life and of her old feminine gender role, now represents the possibility of a new life. By positioning Aila between home and the political world beyond home, Gordimer attempts to break down those fixed barriers of class, race and gender, and deals with them as dynamic categories. In the light of Michel Foucault's description of the role of transgression in cultural change, Aila's transgression of the boundaries of race, gender and culture may well be read as a metaphor for possibilities of cultural transformation in South Africa:

Transgression. Perhaps one day it will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought....Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another....Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being—affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time. (Foucault, 1977: 33-35)

While the novel describes the continuing difficulty in representing South Africa's history and the divided realities of the present, Gordimer's art of cultural negotiation projects a possibility of change, an alternative future for South Africa. Her imaginative writing also moves from simple binary metaphors of culture—black and white, new and old, male and female, Europe and Africa, conventional and radical—to more complex figures of cultural hybridity. Her use of 'coloured' characters is her attempt to develop the trans-ethnic values in her characteristically symbolic representation of the 'coloured' subject.

Withdrawing from the domestic space, Aila crosses the border between the private sphere and the world of politics, and intersects the two worlds. Gordimer thus imaginatively creates a new space for

women who are never afraid of crossing the rigid boundaries of class, race, gender and politics. In Aila, the boundaries between the private and the public, outside and inside become blurred and ambivalent. Gordimer thus invests the 'coloured' woman with the subversive possibility of change and advancement. Her creation of the 'coloured' identity and the 'coloured' family in flux is her new formulation of the interlocking relations between race, gender, and politics and her attempt to explore new racial, gender and political paradigms. By creating new forces in the identity of the cultural hybrid, Gordimer seeks to shape a new reality of South Africa in the time of social and political cataclysm.

In *My Son's Story*, the process of Aila's involvement in political activities and her transformation into a new identity form a major component of the novel. In Aila, Gordimer demonstrates the possibility for women to liberate themselves through the political struggle. In her project of creating a new cultural model and a new model of female subjectivity, Gordimer seems to reassess feminism in the South African context by exploring the possible roles for women in the struggle to liberate the country. In her 'Foreword' to the biography of Olive Schreiner (1989b), Gordimer writes about the possibility of feminist writing in the South African context:

She [Olive Schreiner] may have anticipated (as she did much else) the realization, now, by South Africans of all colours in the liberation movements, that feminism South African style is an essential component in the struggle to free our country from all forms of oppression, political and economic, racist and sexist. (First and Scott 1989: 7)

Gordimer's attempt to explore the roles for women in the new landscape of contemporary South Africa is

well demonstrated in the portrayal of Aila and her transformation. While Hannah's relationship with Sonny is based on a 'special morality' of fascination with political commitment and sexual desire, which is cut off from everyday life, Aila is depicted as representing the banalities of everyday life, the politics 'from the centre of life':

The centre of life was where the banalities are enacted—the fuss over births, marriages, family affairs with their survival rituals of food and clothing, that were with Aila. Because of Hannah, Aila was gone. Finished off, that self that was Aila....Yet she lay beside him alive. Something bigger than self saves self. (243)

In Aila's symbolic movement across the border between home and the unknown world of revolutionaries, the novel creates an intersecting point between new roles for women and their conventional roles in the domestic sphere. Dorothy Driver suggests that 'Gordimer is re-thinking her attitude to feminism' in *My Son's Story* and that she might consider the political project of feminist writing as 'writing from a body that refuses old social and cultural distinctions' (1993: 5). Driver also observes that Gordimer 'may now respond to the revolutionary potential of (another kind of) feminism which sees gender, race, and class as intersecting forces in people's lives' (Ibid.: 4). In *My Son's Story*, Gordimer seems to set up a new cultural space for feminism in her literary enterprise by politicising women characters and creating a transgressive female identity and a trans-cultural space for women.

Conclusion

By introducing a 'coloured' identity in *My Son's Story*, Gordimer has created not only a new narrative voice of the Other but also a new cultural identity.

Through her symbolic representation of the 'coloured' family and their transformation, she develops more dynamic and more complex values for 'coloured' identity. The cross-racial sexual and political relationship between the 'coloured' man and the white woman ironically creates dynamic energies of transgressions of moral and political codes that affect other members in the 'coloured' family. Because race determines so many other relationships in the broad spectrum of life in South Africa, the novel's deconstruction of the fixed category of race through the fluid symbolism of 'coloured' identity necessarily affects other categories of gender, sexuality and politics. This deconstruction of race creates a new release of energy which the 'coloured' women acquire to transcend the boundaries of gender and politics. The female characters are provided with more centralised and more politicised roles as revolutionaries and subvert the conventional and negative images of women as marginalised victims of their society. The novel's deconstruction of the fixed categories represented by Aila's transformation as a revolutionary and by the reversal of the gender division and power relations between her and her husband can be read as an allegory of revolution, about how the relationships in various categories in the liberated future are to be brought about.

As in all Gordimer's fiction, *My Son's Story* is on one level a historical document of a society divided by the effects of apartheid system and it illustrates the process of the displacement of individuals. However, on another level, the novel is an attempt to construct a possible future for the society, one of cultural plurality, and to shape a new reality for a more liberated society. Aila's trans-territorial movement and her achievement of intercultural identity are symbolic of the new situation in a multiracial and cross-cultural society in post-apartheid South Africa. Her writing is thus *avant l'histoire*, anticipating from present implications the

future developments of events and experiences and constructing imaginatively new realities of South Africa.

Notes

- 1) There are numerous studies about the ethnic origins of 'coloured' people in South Africa. See, for example, Patterson 1953: 14-28 and 1975: 159-205; Marais 1957: 1-31 and Valentyn 1971: 171. About ethnic diversity, see Trapido 1972-73: 53-66; Patterson and Fortes 1975: 166-170; Van der Ross 1979: 1-37; Western 1981, and Lewis 1987: 7-10.
- 2) Nearly 90 per cent of the 'coloured' population lived in the Cape. See Marais 1957: 14-15.
- 3) See Lewis 1987: 4, and Chandramohan 1992: 190.
- 4) Van der Ross explores the myths and stereotypes of 'coloured' people and tries to disprove the assumption that 'there is a separate, unique or peculiar Coloured identity of such a kind that it could or should form the basis of legislation' (1979: Introduction).
- 5) Shiva Naipaul, *North of South: An African Journey*, (1978), quoted in John Western 1981: 309.
- 6) Gordimer's later fiction, such as 'A Soldier's Embrace' in *Not for Publication*, *July's People*, *A Sport of Nature*, and *None to Accompany Me*, deals with a time of revolution in South Africa.
- 7) Gordimer establishes this female dominance most prominently in *The Lying Days*, *July's People* and *None to Accompany Me*.

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