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Marek Pawlicki
University of Silesia in Katowice, Institute of Literary Studies
marek.pawlicki@us.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-3477-0831

"Each of Us Has a Thousand Lives": Fragmented Selves in the Stories of Nadine Gordimer

Abstract

The aim of the article is to contribute to a critical debate on the modernist influences in Nadine Gordimer's short fiction by exploring her understanding of human identity in early stories ("In the Beginning" and "The Talisman" [1949]) and showing how this understanding influenced her later works ("The Correspondence Course" [1984]). It is argued that her early stories are informed by two views on identity: one continuous, coherent, and unitary, the other discontinuous, fragmented, and multiple. The latter notion of selfhood is closely associated with Gordimer's conception of the short story as a form uniquely qualified to describe the tensions and ruptures in the lives of her characters. As it is shown, this insight into the short story, discussed at length in Gordimer's essay "The Short Story in Africa" (1968), was derived from post-Enlightenment and post-Romantic conceptions of the self, as expressed by the modernist writers that Gordimer read extensively in her youth. The notion of a non-unitary and non-homogenous self is then applied in an analysis of a later story that concentrates on the political development of a character. In this way, the article proceeds from non-political to political stories, making a connection between topics that are seldom juxtaposed by Gordimer's critics.

Keywords: Nadine Gordimer, short story, South African literature, modernism

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The Surface-Depth Binary in Gordimer's Fiction

In her autobiographical essay "A Bolter and the Invincible Summer" (1963), Nadine Gordimer describes the first steps in her literary career, which began in the late 1930s and would continue for the next seven decades. She argues that before writing became a means of political commitment for her, it was an essential tool in understanding the world, helping her to navigate the complex social and political reality of her native South Africa: "And the 'problems' of my country did not set me writing; on the contrary, it was learning to write that sent me falling, falling through the surface of 'the South African way of life'"

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(Gordimer 1989: 26). Gordimer's thinking about the role of literature was shaped by two key notions: surface and depth. In the 1940s and the 1950s, she argues, writing was a means of exploring that which remained under the surface of life in South Africa; indeed, not only exploring but also finding herself suddenly in the midst of the issues that went unmentioned in the white, middle-class environment in which she was raised.

Among Gordimer scholars, the surface-depth binary is most often associated with South African politics. The most accomplished critic to adopt this approach is Stephen Clingman, the author of the classic study *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, who has also written a number of articles, essays, and chapters devoted to her works. Clingman's most recent articles to date are "Gordimer's Pathologies" (2016) and "Gordimer, Interrupted" (2019). In "Gordimer's Pathologies," a more interesting article from the point of view of the topics discussed below, Clingman continues the rich tradition of politically focused readings of Gordimer's works by applying the notions of surface and depth in the interpretation of both her novels and short stories. Arguing against the rejection of this binary by literary critics (for example Sarah Nuttall), he claims that they can be put to constructive use if they are considered not as binary opposites but rather as two terms entering into what he calls "transactional relationship" (Clingman 2016: 1037). Clingman combines the notion of depth (the realm of the politically suppressed) with that of the surface, choosing to read Gordimer's works by looking at both what they repress and what they express, arguing that it is the combination of depth and surface – what he calls the horizontal and the vertical axes – that is capable of yielding fresh insights into her work.

While Clingman's understanding of surface and depth is compelling, it is not the only way to approach those two notions. My suggestion is to explore surface and depth in such a way as to shed light on Gordimer's explorations of human identity, as presented in her earliest stories (those published in the 1940s), and to show how this binary opposition influenced her more politically focused later work. My claim is that Gordimer's early stories are based on two distinct views on human development: one involving progress, unity, and coherence, the other emphasizing discontinuity, multiplicity, and tension. Many of Gordimer's stories are created in the tension between these two conceptions of selfhood: while the former can be associated with the surface insofar as it is accepted and internalized by the protagonists, the other reveals itself only in moments of heightened perception, for example during times of crisis in the lives of the characters.

By focusing on the modernist influences in Gordimer's early short stories, this article aims to contribute to a wider critical debate about modernism and realism in her oeuvre. One of the most important critics in this debate is Rita Barnard, who, in her article "Locating Gordimer," characterizes Gordimer's writing in general as "a situated postcolonial modernism" (Barnard 2019: 100–101), adding that "situated" means "a commitment to a particular place (indeed, a nation)" (101). Barnard goes on to argue that Gordimer's modernism, as characterized by a sense of geographical and political situatedness, cannot be neatly opposed to realism. Rather than view realism as an unambiguous representation of reality, she mentions Jed Esty's and Colleen Lye's definition of realism, whose task lies in "explor[ing] the hitherto unsaid and unexpressed" (Barnard 2019: 113). One of the passages that Barnard quotes from Esty and Lye's article[1] is their claim that "a realistic mode of representation is meant not to reproduce reality but to interrupt the quasi-natural perception of reality as a mere given" (Barnard 2019: 114).

1 The title of Esty and Lye's article is "Peripheral Realisms Now." The article was published [in:] *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3 (September 2012).

On the basis of this claim, Barnard writes about "the principle of interruption" as a technique that is "simultaneously modernist *and* realist" (Barnard 2019: 114).

Barnard's critical approach to Gordimer's writing is relevant in the context of this article in at least two respects. First of all, its emphasis is on Gordimer's exploration of human perception, both with respect to oneself and others. As it will be shown, Gordimer's stories focus on moments when the seemingly unproblematic nature of reality, as constructed by her protagonists, is problematized – or "interrupted," to use Barnard's term – thus revealing the dimension of the unexpressed in the thoughts and actions of her characters. Another reason why Barnard's article has been mentioned in this discussion is due to its emphasis on the geographical and political situatedness of Gordimer's writing – what Barnard has called Gordimer's "situated postcolonial modernism" (Barnard 2019: 100–101). Indeed, one of the goals of this article is to show how Gordimer's literary explorations of human perception and identity relate to her views on the nature of political commitment. By exploring this topic, this article will trace a continuity between Gordimer's non-political and political stories.

Fragmented Selves: An Analysis of "In the Beginning" and "The Talisman"

At the beginning of her literary career, Gordimer was especially influenced by British and Commonwealth writers. In an interview conducted in 1982, she observed that growing up in white colonial South Africa, she had naturally directed her attention to British and Commonwealth literature: "[I]f I could claim any tradition, I claimed the British tradition" (Bazin and Seymour 1990: 193). The list of names that follows includes (but is not limited to) E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and D. H. Lawrence. While reading E. M. Forster is invariably mentioned – both by Gordimer and her critics – as a formative experience, especially in her liberal humanist understanding of interracial relationships, it is worthwhile to examine more closely Woolf's and Mansfield's influences on Gordimer's early fiction, showing the extent to which Gordimer's writing was shaped by modernist views on identity.

An appropriate starting point for this discussion is Gordimer's first short story collection *Face to Face* (1949), published by the South African company Silver Leaf Books. "In the Beginning," one of sixteen stories included in this volume, is representative of Gordimer's early writing insofar as it shows her preoccupation with the question of perception, especially the tension between how one perceives oneself and how one is viewed by others. The story is narrated from the perspective of a medical student who, together with his colleagues, takes his first steps as an aspiring doctor in a maternity ward under the tutelage of a formidable woman known as Sister Dingwall, the head nurse of the ward. While the larger part of "In the Beginning" concentrates on the young trainees' feverish excitement, as they try to prove themselves as future doctors, it is not their hopes and frustrations that constitute the story's main topic. At the centre of the story is the background character of Sister Dingwall, whom the students treat with a combination of fear, admiration, and silent derision, using what sparse information they can gather about the woman to synthesise authoritative judgments of her. These reductive judgments become the objects of the focalizor's reflection when he looks into the mirror after a hard and frustrating day, realizing that he too is perceived by others in ways that may radically diverge from his self-perception: "Why, *I* look different from what I am, he thought suddenly, that is me, but I don't know it. And also that is not me, and

other people don't know it" (Gordimer 1949: 62). This epiphanic[2] moment of heightened self-perception creates an awareness in the character of the duality of the self as it is mediated through the perception of others. Looking at his own image in the mirror is an encounter with a different version of himself (perhaps seeing himself in years to come) and, at the same time, a moment of acute realization that his self-perception will always diverge from the image that others form of him.

"In the Beginning" illustrates a technique used by Gordimer in her early stories, which may, for the lack of a better term, be described as self-estrangement, understood as a moment which brings to the protagonists' attention dimensions of the self that remain unconscious or suppressed. Importantly, the self-knowledge that the protagonist acquires in the moment of epiphany does not lead to a feeling of confidence and familiarity; rather, Gordimer catches her protagonist in the moment when the newly acquired knowledge destabilizes his sense of self, in other words, when self-knowledge results in self-estrangement. This sudden and momentary self-estrangement is connected with an ethical moment in which the young man becomes aware of the reductive nature of superficial judgments concerning other people – in this case, the brusque and matter-of-fact Sister Dingwall, whose identity is also reduced to her image while at the same time transcending it in ways that will remain obscure to most observers.

Another way of approaching Gordimer's story is from the perspective of metonymy. In his influential *The Modes of Modern Writing*, David Lodge juxtaposes metonymy and synecdoche, pointing out that both those figures involve – not unlike metaphor – "the substitution of one term for another" (Lodge 1977: 76) Writing more recently, Sebastian Matzner uses the word "replacement" rather than "substitution," arguing that "metonymic replacement is far from being a mere substitution" (Matzner 2016: 65). Metonymy, according to Matzner, is capable both of opening new meanings within the text and of making a given passage more cohesive through what he calls "associative interactions" (Matzner 2016: 65). In this function, comments Matzner, metonymy is similar to metaphor:

> Metaphor can and often does function in a similar way, and this function should rather be characterized as a feature of tropical language in general: wherever language deviates from ordinary usage in a way that affects the semantics of a given word, it opens up a space between the present term in its literal meaning and a virtual term whose inference is enforced by the context and indispensable for the sequence to mean anything. (Matzner 2016: 65)

Matzner concludes this part of his analysis by emphasizing that "there is nothing like a poetic and semantic equivalence" (Matzner 2016: 65) between the vehicle and tenor of the metonymy, which is why critics should look beyond the function of metonymy as mere substitution and aesthetic embellishment.

Matzner's reflections on metaphor and metonymy, only outlined above, shed light on the topic of identity in "In the Beginning." At this point, it is worthwhile to once again quote the two sentences giving insight into the protagonist's newly acquired self-awareness: "Why, *I* look different from what I am, he thought suddenly, that is me, but I don't know it. And also that is not me, and other people don't know it" (Gordimer 1949: 62). The quoted passage can be discussed from the perspective of Matzner's general comment on the logic of tropical language, which – in this case – opens up a space between the intuitive, non-reflective use of the first-person pronoun and its more self-conscious, nuanced understanding, whose significance has to be determined – by the reader – in the wider context of the story. Looking in more detail at the use of the "I" in the quoted passage, it becomes apparent that – in this last scene of

2 I am using Morris Beja's definition of epiphany as "sudden illuminations produced by apparently trivial, even seemingly arbitrary causes" (Beja 1971: 13).

the story – Gordimer refers to the metonymic logic of substitution, treating it as a starting point from which to explore the narrator's self-perception. As the man confronts his mirror image, he realizes that he (the one that he perceives as himself) is represented by this image, so that – in the eyes of others – the image is a substitute for who he really is. At the same time, the man sees himself as irreducible to this image ("that is not me"), knowing, however, that this self-perception is not accessible to others ("other people don't know it"). The fact that he does not reject this former revelation, accepting that his self-image reveals another version of himself – one of which he may not be conscious ("I don't know it") – makes his moment of revelation synecdochic in nature. Central to the logic of synecdoche that informs this revelation is the idea of the fragmentary. As the protagonist catches a glimpse of himself in "the narrow wardrobe mirror" (Gordimer 1949: 62), he realizes that the fragmentary and the incomplete are what define him in the eyes of others, constituting his very essence. What this discovery amounts to is the acceptance of the fragmentary, manifesting itself in the essential incompleteness of his identity. If it is true that identity transcends self-perception, as the protagonist realizes at the end of the story, then self-perception is only a fragment of the self – a fact that Gordimer's protagonist is made aware of only in an epiphanic moment of heightened self-awareness.

Since Gordimer's thinking about the short story was strongly influenced by the notions of surface and depth, it is worthwhile to ask how the surface-depth binary relates to the part-whole logic of synecdoche. The answer to this question is that the two relate, albeit in an imperfect way: while both surface and part are associated with the superficial and the reductive, the partial, unlike the superficial, is not a negative category; on the contrary, in the story, it becomes a step towards a more complete awareness of one's identity. This is illustrated by the following brief statement, taken from the quoted passage: "*I* look different from what I am" (Gordimer 1949: 62). The first "I" (italicized by Gordimer, perhaps to contrast it with the "I" that concludes the statement) is the product of the new awareness that the protagonist has reached, namely that his identity involves a difference as well as a similarity with regard to how he perceives himself. The similarity, or contiguity, is conveyed by the fact that the protagonist does not reject his customary self-perception (his statement is not "I *am* different from what I am") but considers both on the same plane: the "I" that begins the sentence is both contiguous to the latter "I" (contiguous in the sense of co-existing closely) and, at the same time, different from it (one is tempted to say "more than it") because it possesses the knowledge that identity transcends self-perception, even if for most of the time and for most people self-perception and identity are coterminous.

To conclude the discussion of "In the Beginning," it is worth adding that the moment when the protagonist confronts his mirror image and experiences his epiphanic moment of heightened self-awareness has a self-reflexive dimension insofar as the mirror image, on the level of the text, represents the perception of the character by the readers. By showing that the mirror image has the potential to represent the person (or, rather, one dimension of this person's character) but that the person cannot be reduced to the image, Gordimer's story enacts the logic of synecdoche only to transcend it.

Gordimer's vision of identity as defined by fragmentation is also clearly visible in the short story "The Talisman," first published in *Face to Face* (1949). The eponymous "talisman" is a piece of clothing – a blue dress that the female protagonist associates with an affair she had in the early years of her marriage. At the beginning of the story, the dress is symbolic of her need to live a life of intensity, outside of her obligations to the past and the future, but later the image of the blue dress in her wardrobe, "maddening as a neon sign" (Gordimer 1949: 153), comes to represent the folly of her past and her reckless decision

to continue her affair alongside her marriage. As the woman contemplates the dress in the wardrobe, she is overcome by a combination of conflicting emotions: guilt, disgust at her former transgressions, but also wistfulness and nostalgia for the intensity of experience that she felt during the affair with her artist-friend: "I was suddenly tortured with the desire to put the dress on; yet at the same time the idea of it on my body filled me with a panic of revulsion. I could not escape from the horrible idea, like madness, almost, that the dress was *me*; that I was looking at – myself" (Gordimer 1949: 154). In the woman's view, clothes – not just the blue dress but clothes in general – are endowed with "the power to *be*, in a way other than human, to persist" (Gordimer 1949: 147). It is not merely a question of the clothes outliving their owners but rather of carrying the memory of who they were when they wore them, even when the owners are no longer alive. In other words, what unsettles the woman is the irrational conviction that some part of herself – a version of her identity – may lie dormant, waiting for the right opportunity to reassert itself. This intuitive insight undermines the notion of identity as a process in favour of a markedly different perception of identity as a collection of various, discrepant, and perhaps even conflicting selves. The narrator hints at this idea when, looking at the blue dress, hidden deep in her wardrobe, she observes: "I had forgotten it, but it had not forgotten me" (Gordimer 1949: 154). When, by the end of the story, the woman discovers that the dress has begun to slowly rot, she reacts with relief, hoping that the conflict between her split allegiances will come to an end. Nevertheless, the symbolic imagery in the story points to a radically different notion of human development: one based not on progress and continuity but rather on breaks and fissures.

Challenging the Notion of a Unitary Self: "The Short Story in Africa"

Gordimer's understanding of human identity as being fragmented and defined by inner conflict evolved at the same time as her views on literature, especially the short story. In Gordimer's view, the short story is uniquely qualified to show the complexity and, at times, contradictory impulses of the human character. In her essay "The Short Story in Africa" (1968), she makes a telling distinction between the novelist and the short story writer, arguing that while the novelist is compelled to create characters whose thoughts and actions are consistent over time ("Each of us has a thousand lives and a novel gives a character only one" [Gordimer 2010: 169]), this requirement does not have to be observed by the latter. In consequence, it is the short story writer who, by virtue of the form practised, can better reflect the multifariousness and fluidity of human motivations. The focus of the short story, argues Gordimer, is on the here and now: "Short-story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment" (Gordimer 2010: 169–170). In Gordimer's conception of the short story, it is the sustained and intense attention devoted to the present moment that is capable of revealing the character in all their complexity, hinting at the "thousand lives" that – in her view – each of us possesses.

When Gordimer – by 1968 an accomplished novelist, as well as a short story writer – argued that short story writers are not bound by the principle of consistency and this freedom enables them to convey what she called "the quality of human life" (Gordimer 2010: 169–70), she was drawing on a vision of the human character as fragmented and discontinuous. This view, which was to form Gordimer's conception of the human psyche, is a distinctly modernist influence in her prose. According to Charles Taylor, the writers of the early twentieth century, inspired by Schopenhauer, rejected the Enlightenment

and Romantic notion of the unitary self, leading to an emphasis on the fragmented and discontinuous. Taylor refers to this modernist project as "the liberation of experience [which] can seem to require that we step outside of the circle of the single, unitary identity, and that we open ourselves to the flux which moves beyond the scope of control or integration" (Taylor 1989: 462). Like the modernists, Gordimer felt strongly that the questioning of a unitary identity does indeed lead to "the liberation of experience," which she consistently saw in terms of the exploration of the complexity and dynamism of human motivations.

While Gordimer was almost certainly not directly influenced by Schopenhauer – there are no references to the philosopher in either her prose or her essays – the same kind of influence must nonetheless have percolated through from such modernist writers as Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, both of whom she read voraciously throughout her twenties. In "Modern Fiction," Woolf famously compared life to "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Woolf 2006: 2089). Clare Hanson argues that the modernists, unlike the realists, saw character not as stable and fully fixed but as split into "external personality," which she describes (echoing Woolf) as "an ever-changing, infinitely adjustable 'envelope'" (Hanson 1985: 56), and "the real self" (Hanson 1985: 56) – an elusive entity surrounded by the "infinitely adjustable 'envelope'" The task of the modernists, according to Hanson, was to explore the "tensions between external and internal identity" (Hanson 1985: 56), trying to find moments when "external personality" comes closest to the character's inner self. Significantly, Hanson argues that this conception of character was influenced by the rise in popularity of the short story – an observation which is also made by Suzanne Ferguson who notes that "the pre-eminence of the short story as a modernist genre grew out of the modern, highbrow audience's acceptance of fragmentation as an accurate model of the world" (Ferguson 1989: 191). According to Ferguson, the focus of the modernist short story is on "being" (as in Woolf's "moments of being") rather than on becoming, as is the case in the Romantic and Victorian novel.

Following the post-Enlightenment and post-Romantic conceptions of selfhood, Gordimer arrived at a vision of human identity that emphasizes fragmentation and contiguity instead of unity and consistency. True to her belief that the short story is the art of the present, she concentrated on moments that bring to light the break and the discrepancy in the otherwise ordered life of her characters. It is through these moments of inconsistency that Gordimer wrote about the multiplicity underlying the (only superficially) unitary identity – the "thousand lives" that, as she believed, each of us leads. The two stories discussed so far show Gordimer in the early stages of formulating this notion of identity. While in "In the Beginning" she explores this intuition with the use of epiphany, in "The Talisman" she uses the symbolism of clothes to describe a sense of selfhood which is in conflict precisely because it is aware of the multiplicity and discrepancy that underlies it. As we have seen, the dresses stored in the woman's wardrobe signify not only memories but also actual versions of the self that lie dormant for the protagonist to rediscover. When the woman contemplates putting on one of the dresses – the one that evokes conflicting emotions of guilt and passion – she is drawn to the prospect of momentary, albeit short-lived self-transformation, but she ultimately decides against this move because it undermines her notion of identity as a single and unitary self. Nevertheless, Gordimer does show her protagonist contemplating discrepant versions of the self, all of them relevant and compelling enough to shape her life.

One way to approach the notion of the fragmented self is by concentrating on the tensions and conflicts experienced by the protagonists. To give one example, in his discussion of Mansfield's stories, Paul March-Russell argues that identity is torn between external forces (social and political pressures)

and internal drives (suppressed desires and motivations): "The self . . . becomes a site of conflict . . . between forces that would subjugate the individual . . . and half-expressed desires that might release the individual" (March-Russell 2009: 97). This observation is pertinent in the context of "The Talisman," where there is clearly a tension between guilt and regret on the one hand, and – on the other – the contrary pull towards what the protagonist considers transgressive, namely her wistfulness and nostalgia for the intensity of experience that she felt during the affair with her artist-friend. While in "The Talisman" the focus is on the internal conflict experienced by the narrator, there are other stories by Gordimer in which the protagonists are shown to progress from one stance to another – especially those that trace the protagonists' political development.

The Essential Discontinuity: Political Development in "A Correspondence Course"

For Gordimer, political growth necessitates a break from one's surroundings and an accompanying break from the self that has been shaped by those surroundings. A revealing commentary on this topic can be found in an interview conducted by John Barkham for *Saturday Review* in 1963, in which Gordimer compared the formation of her political consciousness to the severing of connections with her racial and social origins: "First, you know, you leave your mother's house, and later you leave the house of the white race" (Bazin and Seymour 1990: 9). In the autobiographical essay "A Bolter and the Invincible Summer" (1963), Gordimer describes the comfortable life that she led in her teens and early twenties: she refers to it as a "life of sybaritic meagreness" (Gordimer 1989: 24), adding that throughout those comfortable but intellectually uninspiring and politically uninvolved years, she was closed to the influence of the world outside of her immediate community: in a powerful simile she compares herself to the victim of an accident who is lying in a state of coma "unhearing and unseeing" (Gordimer 1989: 24). It was only at the age of 22, when she went to university, that she emancipated herself from her parents' influence, especially that of her mother, who was a more dominating presence in the Gordimer household. As she began to associate with writers, intellectuals, and political activists, Gordimer joined the ranks of those South Africans, both black and white, who had begun to question the social barrier that stood between the races. While she would later reject the liberal humanist values that she (and many others) held at the time, she went on to think of this stage of her life as definitional: "I think that people like myself have two births, and the second one comes when you break out of the color bar" (Bazin and Seymour 1990: 16).

Gordimer's conception of the story as the art of the present moment, which brings to light the tensions and the discontinuities in the lives of her characters, is well-suited to her notion of political development as the breaking free of one's surroundings. Gordimer is especially interested in the moments when life decisions are taken, showing that the moment of arriving at those decisions is both the culmination of a process and at the same time a radical transition to an identity not yet explored. This process is examined in "A Correspondence Course," first published in *The New Yorker* in 1981 and reprinted in the collection *Something Out There* (1984). "A Correspondence Course" describes the birth of political awareness which is rooted in the eponymous correspondence with a political prisoner and in the politically conscious education that the protagonist receives from her mother. The twenty-year-old Harriet Haberman, daughter of Pat Haberman, is, by all accounts, a model daughter: after receiving her

BA degree, she continues with her studies (the first, non-ironic meaning of "correspondence course"), at the same time living in a house with her mother, with whom she has a friendly and easy rapport. Harriet seems to have inherited her mother's liberal outlook on social and political issues, with her scorn of superficial and materialist white South Africans and the contention that it is through gradual and painstaking involvement with a particular social problem that progress can be attained (as we learn in the first paragraph of the story, she devotes some of her time to a literacy programme for the underprivileged, "sponsored by a liberal foundation" [Gordimer 1984: 104]).

Harriet's correspondence with a political prisoner is welcomed by her mother precisely because it does not exceed the safe perimeters of her moderate political convictions; in other words, what appeals to Pat is the thought that one can bring about a positive change in another person's life without putting oneself to excessive trouble and risk. With the prisoner at large, Harriet's decision to leave him a bundle containing her clothes outside their house is a gesture that transcends Pat's defensive and egoistic thinking, but it is, at that point, hardly a transgression of her mother's rules: indeed, it is unclear whether the bundle of clothes that Harriet hangs on the outside of their fence is an invitation to enter their life or rather a plea to stay away from it. Harriet's difference from her mother emerges only at the very end of the story, when the prisoner arrives at their door. In strong contrast to her mother's panic at seeing their orderly life suddenly transformed, Harriet is described as calm and purposeful: "Harriet stood up calmly as if she had heard her name called; and went to close the door behind him" (Gordimer 1984: 115). It is at this point that Harriet, a background character in the story, emerges from her mother's shadow. Harriet's decision to take responsibility for her actions can be viewed as a gesture of rebellion against her mother's policy of non-involvement, constituting a decisive break from the passivity that constitutes the object of Gordimer's criticism.

In an incisive article about Gordimer's short fiction, Barbara Eckstein refers to the political commitment in her prose as "secularized transcendence" (Eckstein 1985: 343), capable of giving her protagonists a sense of higher purpose and deep joy. This sense of purpose makes it possible for Gordimer's protagonists to overcome the tension that results from the conflicts between external and internal forces, and thus achieve a sense of wholeness that Gordimer associated with two distinct causes: love and political commitment. That these two causes are often intertwined in Gordimer's prose is well illustrated in "A Correspondence Course": while the arrival of the escaped prisoner is greeted by Pat with terror, manifesting itself in "the sweeps of heat that had gone through her blood at fifty" (Gordimer 1984: 115), Harriet is described as being young, attractive, and completely separate from her identity as a daughter. Gordimer hints at this interpretation when – in the last scene of the story – she describes Pat sitting in a closed room, trying to gauge the situation by listening to the sounds coming from her daughter's room: "[T]he voices that came through them; even a subdued laugh" (Gordimer 1984: 115). The "subdued laugh" heralds a newly-discovered sense of wholeness, derived both from her political self-assertion and her personal emancipation, the latter understood as the breaking free from her role of the obedient and subdued daughter.[3]

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3 It is worth adding that while love (which in Gordimer's prose manifests through sexual fulfillment) and political involvement are often intertwined in her works, the essential difference between them is that unlike love, political involvement brings the promise of a more permanent sense of wholeness, dependent not on the dynamic and changeable relationships between individuals but on one's sense of determination and resolve. This view informed Gordimer's later writing in particular, for example her critically acclaimed novel, *None to Accompany Me* (1994).

Concluding this discussion of "A Correspondence Course," it is worth adding that while Gordimer in her prose often anticipates the sense of wholeness promised by political involvement, as a writer, she is more interested in searching for cracks in this political and personal stance – moments of inconsistency in the reasoning or the actions of her protagonists – doing so to explore the human beneath the political: the complex and often conflicting allegiances beneath their dedication to a given social or political cause.

Conclusion: Exploring the Inconsistencies in Human Character

The conception of human identity as essentially fragmented continued to influence Gordimer's prose in the two final decades of her creativity. In the fascinating lecture "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" (1994), delivered almost three decades after "The Short Story in Africa" (1968), she made the following point: "For one of the few sure things the writer knows is that inconsistency is the consistency of human character" (Gordimer 1995: 6). Gordimer explored the human character both in her novels and her short stories, but it is the latter that she found uniquely qualified to shed light on the doubts, hesitations, and non-sequiturs in the thoughts and actions of her protagonists. Gordimer believed that unlike political propaganda, whose aim is to paint crude and simplistic pictures of determination and resolve, the role of literature is to shed light on the features that remain deeply hidden within a person, including the underlying tensions and conflicts that shape that person's life. She saw in the inherent inconsistency of human character both a potential source of empowerment – when it gives rise to a break from internalized social pressure or from regressive ways of perceiving the world – and as a possible obstacle to self-development, especially when it leads to a dissonance between the person's chosen goals and their true desires. Irrespective of whether her stories show characters in their moments of emancipation or unable to progress beyond a self-conflicted stance, Gordimer's presentation of her protagonists is characterized by her conviction about every human being's capacity to endlessly redefine themselves in response to changing circumstances and inner motivations.

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