



**HAL**  
open science

# The Politics of the Couple in Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*: "More important than anything we could ever have to say to each other when we're alone"

Nicolas Pierre Boileau

## ► To cite this version:

Nicolas Pierre Boileau. The Politics of the Couple in Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*: "More important than anything we could ever have to say to each other when we're alone". *Cycnos*, 2018, Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories : parcours critiques*, 34 (3), pp.55-69. hal-01959129

**HAL Id: hal-01959129**

**<https://amu.hal.science/hal-01959129v1>**

Submitted on 20 Dec 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## **The Politics of the Couple in Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*: “More important than anything we could ever have to say to each other when we're alone”**

**Nicolas Pierre Boileau**

*Aix Marseille Université, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France*

Despite Gordimer's radical engagement with the politics of South Africa, her fiction denotes a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the liberal views expected from her. The first section of *Writing and Being* immediately undermines the readers' wish to see her as a political writer when she asserts “the right to declare with Ibsen – the book is not *about*, it is” (Gordimer 1995, 6). An overview of the criticism published on Gordimer's work reveals that she is never where critics would like her to be situated: some find that her work does not fit into the postcolonial paradigm (Dimitriu 2006, 164); some praise the influence modernism had on her writing (Huggan), while others regret the persistence of this aesthetics as a point of reference when South African writers have started exploring voices of their own (Byrne). Karen Lazar refers to Gordimer's “paradox” regarding feminism and gender issues that she is renowned to have neglected (Lazar 784), while others note a gradual change in the place of women, through the years, especially after the publication of *Jump* (Driver, qtd in Lazar 784). Gordimer's interest in gender issues surface in her work in a covert fashion that is best expressed by what happens in the intimate relationships of couples, where the questions of women's place and roles can be probed. Most critics have noted “her new concern with private life” but I would not argue that it is not “inextricably linked to the public domain” (Dimitriu 2006, 159). It is through intimate relations that she observes elements that can range far out, even if, in the political context of apartheid, questions of gender and class identity might have been downplayed in relation to the more pressing question of ethnic segregation (Crozier-De Rosa): is an encounter or a relation(ship) with an Other possible? Can gender politics be thought outside the sexual encounter? If Gordimer's writing is South African in its themes, the writer also confesses to an interest in more universal questions that reverberates back into her analysis of the politics

of home: “What do we writers have to work on as looters in that fragmentation of the possibilities of observation, of interaction, of grasp, in the seen and unseen, constant flux and reflux, the conscious and unconscious defined as ‘life’” (Gordimer 1995, 4-5).

*Jump* is marked by variations on the theme of incomprehension, both characters and readers facing a “life” that is enigmatic, as revealed through the simple, recurrent phrase, “I don’t know” (‘Ultimate Safari’ 33; ‘Terraloyna’ 99; ‘A Journey’ 145; etc). This simple enough phrase awakens a biblical heritage of carnal knowledge highlighted in such use of the expression as “as if he didn’t know her” (‘The Moment Before the Gun Went Off’ 117). The phrase also evokes political, cultural and social perplexity in a country whose geography was meant to order, classify and inscribe in the very landscape a regime of interaction and power relations, to use Foucault’s terminology. It is the subjective experience of a collective state of perplexity that this lack of knowledge highlights, as if the personal was always political, one of the great mottos of feminism in the 1970s (Bryson). Gordimer’s stories stage many examples of characters being at odds with their circumstances: unhappy couples, homes that are unsafe, and characters that remain oblivious to their desires and motivations. At the heart of all relationships, but perhaps more so in marriage, is the failure of language to bring people together, its propensity to darken or make opaque feelings that are quite difficult to work out anyway. From a traditional point of view, the association of knowing and coupling may offer an ironic, indirect route to the exploration of the symbolic function of the couple in these stories (Miller). This resonates with the state of a Nation that was about to implement legal, if not actual, reunification. According to Nancy Topping Bazin, increasingly in the novels of Gordimer, there is a question about how whites may fit in South Africa once the Blacks have achieved independence. The white woman in this context is getting closer to black men as if the white woman was the instrument of a reconciliation (Bazin). Women in Gordimer’s later fiction seem to be the site of an exploration of different modalities of union and unification, relations and relationships, an encounter with an other that is foreign even when seemingly the same, a political concern whose possibility was still fragile at the time. It may also be the role that Gordimer assigned herself and the writer in general. However, what needs discussing is whether this somewhat traditional role – woman as an instrument of reconciliation – may not be further elaborated in connection to the division between subjects and their desires, – desire being here a concept

that goes beyond the mere question of the sexual, and the instinctual: it is the linguistic imprint of desire on the body (Lacan 2013).

In *Jump*, couples, like homes, are seen as sites of subjective danger (in ‘Once Upon a Time’, ‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ or ‘Safe Houses’), defined as they are by misunderstanding and lack of communication (in ‘Home’, ‘Jump’, ‘Amnesty’, to name a few). Yet, the truth of these relationships is often made complex because sexual intercourse takes place all the same, with graphic details and bodily matters openly discussed (‘Jump’, ‘Safe Houses’, ‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’, ‘Spoils’, etc.), as if the most intimate aspects of life were indeed revealed in couples. Even for those involved in politics, the intimate experience of the couple is one where cracks and fractures question the notion of togetherness, and thus the collective, while often enabling individuals to keep up appearances through a marital union that does not dissolve. The “gift for languages” (‘Jump’ 10) is precisely what paradoxically precipitates the main character’s (down)fall in ‘Jump’ – both in his public and private lives. The “Find” of Gordimer’s tales might well be that “they live together with no more unsaid...than any other couple” (‘A Find’ 54). If the black and white divide persists in these South African stories, the exploration of the couple offers a political reflection of/on the different modalities by which “contact” may be construed as “the flash of fireflies”, as Gordimer puts it (Gordimer 1976). This paper shall address the different ways in which the author explores repeatedly failed relationships, torn between knowing and not knowing, the said and the unsaid, falling in and out of love, home and the city, and the limits of telling these failed rapports create. This will help us address the contingent aspect of the interplay between the individual and the collective (as in ‘Amnesty’), whereby Gordimer’s so-called realism may be reappraised, as she suggests in ‘Adam’s Rib’, as more concerned with the real than realities; or in other words, with systemic rather than circumstantial reality (Gordimer 1995, 7-12).

Gordimer’s couples are all marked by an openness regarding bodily matters, a physical attraction that celebrates the most basic physicality: reviewing various post-apartheid writings, Rita Barnard concludes that the texts she studies “all share... a preoccupation with a set of relating motifs (hunting, cooking, eating – especially meat-eating – and the food chain), motifs that allow the writers to explore the most fundamental relations of power and the most basic differences between nature and culture” (Barnard 137-38). Gordimer’s short stories give pride of place to bodies, what is usually not talked about, even in intimate relationships,

an animality and physicality that verges on impropriety. The opening paragraph of ‘Spoils’ crudely evokes a basic, physical production that is seldom spoken about in fiction and socially silenced, but it is not gratuitous and is woven into the fabric of the text. Some characters have to suffer ailments of their own, incapable of knowing whether these are caused by their unconscious obsession or some illness taking hold of them: this is for example the case of the male character of ‘Home’ who, as he suspects his wife might have become unfaithful, felt “a crawling sensation round the anus” (‘Home’ 137). A somatic reading of this seems obvious enough – the health of his relationship with his wife is questioned. The body is imagined as a site of negotiation and re-connection with the other: “What would such a distasteful detail mean to her, at this time?” he wonders (‘Home’ 137). The encounter of one’s body or with the others’ catalyses various modalities of unconscious drives: attraction and disgust, life and death drives, health and illness, etc. The most basic is thus not synonymous with a simple definition.

The narrator of ‘My Father Leaves Home’ reconstructs the relationship of his father with women in terms that emphasise the bodily functions associated to disgust: “But perhaps he gave up that rank because when he got into bed beside his wife in the dark after those Masonic gatherings, she turned away, with her potent disgust, from the smell of whisky on him” (‘My Father Leaves Home’ 64). Bodies speak of, or are spoken in relation to, a sense of disgust that the wife cannot hide anymore; the smell is then evocative of a “gathering” that is now impossible within marriage: “In the quarrels between husband and wife, she saw them [‘the old people in that village whom the wife and children had never seen’] as ignorant and dirty; she must have read something somewhere that served as a taunt: you slept like animals round a stove, stinking of garlic, you bathed once a week” (‘My Father Leaves Home’ 64). The physical encounter is thus not basic, instinctual, but it already forms part of the symbolic order. In this quote, the discovery of a word or expression intersects with pre-existing representations of the humans as primitives and leads to the rupture of the couple and the dysfunction of a union that had been so far rather stable. Although the animality evoked by this scene reeks of a more complex, racist subtext, it also suggests that couples are the sites of a dangerous return to, or discovery of, deeply lodged, unruly instincts that tempt the characters back to a proper, stable life where all these effects would remain veiled. And yet, desire for a union with another, – mating, coupling or whatever relationship is opted for – knows no bounds, and *jouissance* is by definition anti-social

(Vanier). In 'Safe Houses' (Lazar 15), the character who seeks to remain alone becomes "aware like an animal" of the presence of a woman: "scenting something different in the bus's familiar sun-fog of sweat and deodorants, fruit-skins and feet. Perfume... And a sound of silk as a leg crossed the knee of another leg" ('Safe Houses' 184). This initial sense of communion is confirmed later when they have sex for the first time, a sexual intercourse described as that of two experts, in the know so to speak, who do it with "a kind of unexpected bluntness" ('Safe Houses' 200). His kisses are even compared to a "cannibal testing flesh" ('Safe Houses' 201). And yet, desire jeopardises the safety of the encounter: if the main character reassures himself that this woman is a safe lover because she does not know who he is, she sleeps with him before asking whether he might be HIV positive and wonders how she is going to keep this affair from her husband. Sexual intercourse is thus not primitive instinct but is presented as a failed encounter of desiring bodies which are the sites of a dialectics between emotions and language. The physicality is yet to be interpreted; it is the sign of something else.

If the text dwells on physical details, it is in a contradictory fashion: most couples negotiate difficult, asymmetrical relationships and yet, the union of bodies still happens. In the title story, whose focus can hardly be said to be the couple, the ending sees the presence of "a girl", as anonymous and insignificant as her apparent part in the story. The relationship sets a pattern for the other relationships of the collection and furthers the complex interplay between the main character's silence, his repeated acts of telling and his incapacity to conclude, as well as his withdrawal from the public sphere: "After he had finished with her, last night, she said: You don't love me"; "She hangs about the room behind him, this morning, knowing he's not going to speak" ('Jump' 19). The absence of punctuation marks enables Gordimer to blend voices, that of the girl and that of the main character, so that the text seems to speak both at the level of the relationship and at the greater scale of the testimony that he endlessly repeats. The expression "after he had finished with her" may be attributed to the man but also equivocates with the state of this relationship that sexual intercourse rebuffs; it ironically comes where the text confirms that there will be no end. The character's sense of an ending is destabilised, so that when he "finishes" with his girlfriend, he knows that it is not over, as with his tapes: "And that's the end. / But it's gone over again and again. No end. It's only the tape that ends. Can't be explained how someone begins really to know. Instead of having intelligence by fax and satellite" ('Jump' 17). Analysed as a

reference to Beckett and Shakespeare (Riach 1085), and I would add to Conrad's *Lord Jim*, which is also about an enigmatic jump, this story interrogates the limits of telling, both in the couples, and in the public space where the character refuses to go. In a typical paradox, what the girl knows is that she will not know, that carnal knowledge is not conducive to a relation – an impression reinforced by the fact that the act itself seems to have been performed out of mechanical duty rather than interest.

The collection ends with a story that symmetrically replays 'Jump', only to open opposed or competing routes for the future. In 'Amnesty', the point of view is not the political activist's but the girlfriend's, equally nameless. The shift suggests that the personal is the mode of access to the political, instead of the other way around. The woman is delighted to hear that her promised husband, a political prisoner, is about to come out of what is probably Robben Island, after five years in prison. Many elements in the story echo and subvert 'Jump'. The latter deals with a white activist, when the other deals with a black one; the latter shows a man stuck in his "home", when the other portrays him as recently freed. Both men are said to be great speakers, oratory skills that have led both to action and imprisonment: the nameless prisoner had "always been good at talking, even in English" ('Amnesty' 247). However, in each story, the amorous (for lack of a better word) relationship fails: love hurts in the beginning of 'Amnesty', when the narrator, only too happy to get a chance of seeing her man, gets a scratch from the fence. The imprisonment of her boyfriend has meant that she is stuck in the farm next to her in-laws, raising the daughter she was pregnant with when he was arrested. The only time she could pay him a visit, she had not thought of getting a permit: the trip confirmed that there was never going to be a reunion. The narrator is speechless most of the time, no more able to speak than she is of exchanging a piece of paper with the policemen: "the wind blew the voice out of my mouth" ('Amnesty' 250). Over five years, their relationship evolves: she gradually realises that the letters he sends her are not for her eyes only, that the words of love are words of manipulation. When he comes home, the man's relationship with the women of his world are scarce: his daughter refuses to speak to him; he does not seem to speak to his wife; when they are alone, intercourse is described from the very marginal aspect of his strong body, a union of bodies that looks like an anomaly but which still occurs: "that night – when he lay on me he was so heavy, I didn't remember it was like that" ('Amnesty' 253). The intimate relationship of this couple, who do not

manage to re-unite, notwithstanding the physical union that led her to be pregnant again, invites us to think about a future that is less bright than the liberation of a black man in the context of South Africa could infer: “He forgets I’m there when he’s talking and arguing about something I can see is important, more important than anything we could ever have to say to each other when we’re alone” (‘Amnesty’ 255). This results in a failed encounter whereby the other, here the other sex, but out there maybe the Other race, is endangered, null, absent, despite the lure of the sexual intercourse that connects the bodies: “I stay, and listen... The men don’t speak to me and I don’t speak” (‘Amnesty’ 255). These recurrent realisations throughout the collection seem to suggest that other comments such as “Complicity is the only understanding” (‘What were you Dreaming?’ 220) are indeed illusions that the writer seeks to detect, ironically underline and positively refuse, questioning the possibility of, rather than revealing the paradoxical nature of, political engagement.

Lacan’s famous formula that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship (Lacan 1975, 17), a translation that does not equivocate as much in English, is evoked by the observations of Gordimer’s heterosexual couples. What Lacan means is certainly not that people do not have sex, but that “when one loves, it has nothing to do with sex” (Lacan 1975, 25). One fruitful way of rephrasing this statement would be to consider that when one speaks, one does not share the other’s *jouissance*, and that there is no dialogue possible towards a shared experience of the unconscious. Gordimer analyses the complex interplay between love, relations and relationships through the various couples that she stages, where women are instruments of men’s satisfaction in a somewhat traditional vision: “Perhaps they had offered to send a girl out for him, a home girl with whom he could make love in his own language” (‘My Father Leaves Home’ 62). Sexual intercourse is not a physical act, but an act that is constructed and spoken. Interestingly, this couple is one of the many who are staged as not speaking to each other: their exchanges are all in indirect speech. The story ‘Safe Houses’ is the only example of a long dialogue between two lovers, but this dialogue only emphasises the many occasions for incomprehension, supposedly related to the fact that the man is a fugitive but more likely the result of this impossible rapport. The first such occasion occurs on the bus when they meet and she moans about her own lack of practical spirit. He picks up on her use of the phrase “Isn’t it typical?”, which he does not interpret as an idiom. When he asks her what she really means with this cliché, she finds that his question is an inappropriate breach of propriety between



two strangers: ‘None of his business! Who was he to quiz a manner of speaking, as if to find out if it had some significance in her life’ (‘Safe Houses’ 188). Forcing her to envisage “typical” accidents of her life, the question also probes into her unconscious slips in a way that she rejects. The relationship is off balance and off to a bad start. The ensuing dialogue that leads to the affair becomes the site of an invention (profession, symbols) and fiction is said to be resorted to not so much as an escape from reality but as a cover for truth: “He was at ease with his invented persona” (‘Safe Houses’ 191). From then on, the disconnection between the characters is repeated and the most simple phrases are castigated for their lack of connection with the real, here again evoking Beckett’s work on language: “I must go. – He spoke, not moving” (‘Safe Houses’ 199). Harry is so eager to be safe that he marvels at his own deceptive powers. Even the realisation that she may have given him a wrong name too does not stop him from thinking she is none the wiser: “She had no inkling of anything real behind his fairy tales” (‘Safe Houses’ 192). In the centre of the story, one may feel that masks have dropped: Sylvie tells Harry of her husband, as if the intimate encounter had made all the barriers of repression and inhibition crumple down. Sylvie, paradoxically, overtly discusses her husband’s habit of leaving the bathroom open when he goes to the toilet, which she takes to be bad manners. This seems to Harry a contradiction:

[...] you’re a very physical lady –  
 – About love-making, yes ... you think, because of the things I do, with you. But that’s different, that’s love-making, it’s got nothing to do with what I’m talking about. –  
 – If sex doesn’t disgust you as a function of the body, then why so fastidious about its other functions? You accept a lover’s body or you don’t. – (‘Safe Houses’ 203)

This dialogue reveals multiple levels of equivocation: the *sexual* encounter has had no effect on *another* encounter, and Harry and Sylvie do not know each other the way they assume they do. The transference of urine and sperm ironically becomes the point of divergence between men on the one hand – it seems the husband and lover are aligned – and women on the other. Sylvie’s reply is to ask if Harry would accept his lover’s body “with a breast off” (‘Safe Houses’ 203). For Harry, love is the enjoyment of *another* body; for Sylvie, the otherness is best concealed, restricted to that space of an illusory union. However, Harry is

so caught up in his physical attraction for Sylvie that he does not realise that she may be a threat: “who he was didn’t exist for her, he was safe” (‘Safe Houses’ 208). The sexual relationship is only a lure.

The story ends with an ironic twist: Harry is recognised and returned to the police, and his last reflection suggests that he fears Sylvie might have played a part in it. Thus the ‘real’ encounter had nothing to do with a specific knowledge, but with something unbeknownst to him. He did not apply the basic rules he had set out in the beginning, following the paradox that in order to hide, one should be out in the open:

Small gatherings where everyone can be trusted are traps; glowing with the distinction of the secret encounter with a real revolutionary, someone will not be able to resist boasting to another, in strictest confidence, and that other will pass on the luminous dusting of danger. (‘Safe Houses’ 184)

Danger comes from confidence indeed, but complicity certainly did not mean understanding. Some critics have grappled with the failure of these unions. Brahimî wants coexistence to be the response to the difficulty of the encounter, but she does not see the couple as one of the modalities of other difficult rapports (Brahimi 103-104). Wade’s Forsterian title to his essay on Gordimer, ‘Only Connect’, neglects the function of the couple in order to evoke social questions about the regime of interactions and inter-racial marriages (Wade 84-92). Most, however, seem to consider that Gordimer’s stories of intimacies are departures from, rather than leaps into, the possibility of a political appraisal of union.

Couples are failing, which undermines the possibility for other forms of union. In ‘A Find’, the first sentence indicates an incompatibility that is radical: “To hell with them!” (‘A Find’ 49) The story is based on an epic speed-dating where women are judged by the lies and fiction they are able to invent to connect to him and ironically get the ring: blamed for being seductive, accused of being idiots, none of these women satisfy, until something in the “voice” of the contestant appeals to the man: “the controlled voice of a singer or an actor, maybe, expressing diffidence.” And this is followed by indirect dialogue that sounds indeed like ready-made sentences (‘A Find’ 54). The couple were posited as impossible from the start of the story and the ending suggests a parabolic reading that poses a serious threat to social interaction. In ‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’, what Vera is attracted to is the

otherness of a boy who is a lodger in her home, the presence of another within, whose body is like his language: if “His naked foot was an intimate object, another secret” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 74), it is his language that puzzles her even more: “To gain time she looked at the papers. The one in his hand was English. On the others, lying there, she was confronted with a flowing script of tails and gliding flourishes, the secret of somebody else’s language” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 74). Thus, the relationship is based on a desire to open up the secret of an other being and to find a point of contact. This enables Gordimer to pass an ironic and cruel comment on the snobbish blindness of those for whom foreignness is readily associated to a terra incognita: Rad as the rest of his “kind” is a “mystery” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 74), but it turns out that the mystery is not a subjective wall set against other people’s intrusion. This mystery is the sign of political plotting that fails to be interpreted. Before this happens though, the story develops the sexual relationship and lack of rapport between both characters, because sex is where it all started and where things will remain: “The black box was recovered from *the bed of the sea* and revealed that there had been an explosion in the tourist-class cabin followed by a fire; and there, the messages ended; silence, the disintegration of the plane” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 88, my emphasis). The detail of the place where the black box is discovered cannot but be another ironic comment, because the bed is where it all started to go wrong for Vera.

The beginning of the story perfunctorily sets the stage for the sexual encounter, which is a first for Vera: the girl and the lodger, a story we have heard before, a teenage love marked by an absence of fear and of prejudice. The pair become friends; Vera stops seeing other people to make sure she is at home when he is in; it is set in summertime when senses are meant to be attuned to this sort of mating and when the weather conditions are propitious to sexual awakening. Brutally, this rom-com material is subverted by the author, when the F-word is used despite the heavy stress laid on the sensuality of intercourse and the willing submission of Vera, twice compared to a doe (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 79): “Everything was changed” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 80). From then on, the story becomes more menacing. Vera inevitably gets pregnant, but this reveals the rift that the sexual act lured her into denying. Vera’s lack of accuracy and linguistic prowess is repeatedly underlined. As she announces that she is pregnant, the text reads: “Just forget it. – She was afraid he would stop loving her – her

term for love-making” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 82). The narrative voice insists: “She remembered reading in some women’s magazine that it was dangerous to do anything to get rid of ‘it’ (she gave her pregnancy no other identity) after three months” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 82). Language therefore fails Vera and remains a bone of contention between the two characters, who, despite becoming a couple, remain separate throughout the story. Vera does not realise that Rad is not reading the papers and that may be re-interpreted in the aftermath of the story’s outcome as more dangerous than exotic: “Of course, being a foreigner, he didn’t come out with things the way an English speaker would express them” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 82). The sexual attraction is therefore successful but the ensuing relationship equally crumples because quite tragically, Vera is blinded by the physical *jouissance* that leads her to a very individual, solipsist form of enjoyment: “And I love *you*, she said, I love you, I love you – babbling through vows and tears” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 83). The words of love come to supplement the failure of the physical consummation in exhausting her desire.

The intricate skein of problematic issues revealed by this union (racist, class, neo-colonialist) are best exemplified in the ironical scene concerning the rules of marriage: Rad is plotting a terrorist attack by using his “intended” wife and future child as suicide bombers on a plane but he pretends that the trip he organises is purely due to common-sense, traditional marriage rules: his parents must have met his future wife before the pair get married. This sounds like common sense. Vera’s parents and herself are both blinded by their prejudiced anticipation of ethnic differences that happen to be their own projection of other cultures: “He answered with the gravity with which, they realised, marriage was regarded where he came from” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 84). Given Vera’s parents’ initial response to her forming a relationship with Rad, this cannot but seem like a slight lack of judgement on their own seriousness. Marriage becomes an occasion to reflect upon the instability of fixed barriers and the way sex and its real offspring are immediately caught up in the symbolic function of language: Vera is over the moon at the idea of travelling, she turns her relationship with Rad into a mark of “distinction”, rekindles former alliances and discovers the strong ties between “desire” and “the pride of telling” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 84). Only she does not realise “the fact one says remains forgotten behind what is said in what is heard” (Lacan 1975, 15). “The messages ended”, to use the last words of the

story, because the encounter is indeed a plunge in the unsoundable subjectivity of an Other: “It was not leaving Rad, but going, carrying his baby, to the mystery that was Rad, that was in Rad’s silences, his blind love-making, the way he watched her, thinking in his own language so that she could not follow anything in his eyes” (‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’ 86). The physical mating is therefore the ultimate deception of reality for Vera, who is overwhelmed by the real: that of her child and her death. This story enables us to reconnect the couple to political concerns: union is impossible and writing comes to supplement and re-tell that which never satisfies.

In ‘A Journey’, the relationship is again approached through the paradox of sexual intercourse that makes the rift between the lovers all the more blatant. The story constantly shifts the point of view so as to structurally inscribe the literal explosion of coherence and cohesion, reify the woman, and annul the possibility of a definite sense of truth. The “trinity” of the household is challenged with the arrival of a new baby that goes against the son’s observations: “My mother and father were almost silent at meals. The private language that we used together – cat-language – we didn’t use any more” (‘A Journey’ 146). The silence is due to an affair that the husband is having and that challenges the stability of their relationship. The quietness is for the child a sign of separation. This makes his mother’s pregnancy all the more unreal, because the sexual act in this context is an anomaly:

And yet it was that time that it happened – the baby. They made the baby. My mother told me one day: I’m going to have a baby. [...] I know about sex, of course, how she’d got pregnant, what my father had done with her, although they didn’t smile at each other, didn’t tease or laugh at each other any more. (‘A Journey’ 147)

Throughout the stories of *Jump*, the favourite expression to designate sexual intercourse is “love-making” (in ‘Some are Born to Sweet Delight’, or again in ‘Safe Houses’) but, although Gordimer stages sexual intercourse, she also challenges the concept of love, such as in ‘Spoils’: “Would he have wanted to take her nipples in his mouth, commit himself to love-making, if he hadn’t fallen asleep, or was his a gesture from the wings just in case the audience might catch a glimpse of a slump to an off-stage presence?” (‘Spoils’ 164). In ‘A Journey’, the real presence of the baby is a reminder of a union that cannot exist: the baby

looks like nobody, the hair is testament to a further separation. The whole story is about the paradoxical presence of that which cannot be talked about and the notion that speaking is an exposure that is not worth risking:

‘The silence is over’. Because the love affair is over. The silence in which the love affair was hidden, precious and thrilling, something she must not be allowed to touch with a word, now seems an agony endured. [...] she stopped undressing in front of him because they could not speak. (‘A Journey’ 152)

In Lacan’s *Encore*, physical attraction is taken to be the exact opposite of what the Biblical heritage teaches us: it is not knowing, it is the lure of the imaginary that is best expressed in the saying: “I don’t want to know anything about it” (Lacan 1975, 1). Knowing therefore is thought as that which cannot happen in the couple. Lacan’s second argument is that Eros is not a tension towards the One, it is not a re-union to someone (Lacan 1975, 5). The number of dysfunctional couples that can be found in *Jump*, and which prolong the situation found in some of her previous novels, invite us to think about the possibility of a relation, which can then interrogate our ready-made notions about gender politics. Gordimer explains “What is Apartheid all about? It is about the body. It is about physical differences... and I think subconsciously that comes into my work too” (Bazin 187). In *Writing and Being* she describes the job of a writer as looting and cannibalism. The physicality of love-making is a reality that screens the real encounter with the enigma of the Other’s subjective pleasure, treasure, and desire. If some critics have been extremely critical of Gordimer’s lack of interest in gender politics, to the extent that her treatment of women may have appeared as essentialist (Lazar 18), I think that the analysis of the couple shows another dimension: her fiction refuses an entirely socially constructed notion of sex and replaces it with a relational character that enables one to interrogate the reification of women’s desire in heteronormative cultures but also to reflect upon the possibility that two may indeed become one, a haunting desire and anxiety in South Africa.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARNARD, Rita. 'The Final Safari: On Nature, Myth, and the Literature of the Emergency'. *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy 1970-1995*. Eds. Derek Attridge & Rosemary Jolly. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998: 123-140.
- BAZIN, Nancy Topping. 'White Women, Black Revolutionaries: Sex and Politics in Four Novels by Nadine Gordimer'. *African Visions: Literary Images, Political Change, and Social Struggle in Contemporary Africa*. Eds. Cheryl Mwaria, Silvia Fredercici and Joseph McClaren. Westport: Praegar, 2000: 177-191.
- BRAHIMI, Denise. *Nadine Gordimer : La Femme, la politique et le roman*. Paris: Karthala, 2003.
- BRYSON, Valerie. *Feminist Political Theory, An Introduction* (1992). 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003.
- BYRNE, Deirdre. 'Versions of Transgression: Recent Southern African Writing'. *Current Writing*, 4.1 (1992): 143-148.
- CROZIER-DE ROSA, Sharon. 'Divided Sisterhood? Nationalist Feminism and Militancy in England and Ireland'. *Contemporary British History*, Special issue: "The British left and Ireland". Eds. Matthew Worley and Evan Smith, in press.
- DIMITRIU, Ileana. 'A New Sense of Social Space: Gordimer's Civil Imaginary'. *Spaces and Crossings: Essays on Literature and Culture in Africa and Beyond*. Eds. Rita Wilson and Carlotta van Maltzan. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001: 335-48.
- . 'Postcolonialising Gordimer: The Ethics of 'Beyond' and Significant Peripheries in the Recent Fiction'. *English in Africa*, 33.2 (October 2006): 159-180.
- GORDIMER, Nadine. "The Flash of Fireflies". *Short Story Theories*. Ed. Charles E. May. Ohio: Ohio UP, 1976: 178-181.
- . *Jump and Other Stories*. London: Bloomsbury and Penguin Books, 1991.
- . *Writing and Being*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.
- HUGGAN, Graham. 'Echoes from Elsewhere: Gordimer's Short Fiction as Social Critique'. *Research in African Literatures*, 25.1 (1994): 61-73.
- LACAN, Jacques. *Le Séminaire, Livre VI, Le Désir et son interprétation* (1958-1959). Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Paris: Éditions de la Martinière, 2013.

- . *Le Séminaire, Livre XVII, L'Envers de la psychanalyse* (1969-70). Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1991.
- . *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge* (1972-73), Trans. Bruce Fink. New York, Norton, 1999.
- LAZAR, Karen. 'Jump and Other Stories: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990s: Gender and Politics in Her Latest Short Fiction'. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18.4 (December 1992): 783-802.
- MILLER, Jacques-Alain. 'Truth is Coupled with Meaning'. Trans. Nicolas Boileau and Roger Litten. *The Lacanian Review*, 2 (2016): 9-20.
- RIACH, Graham, 'The Late Nadine Gordimer'. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42.6 (November 2016): 1077-1094.
- VANIER, Alain. 'La fin de la cure'. *Figures de la psychanalyse*, 20.2 (2010): 81-92. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-figures-de-la-psy-2010-2-page-81.htm>, accessed 4 November 2018.
- WADE, Michael. "'Only" Connect?, or Young Nadine's Progress'. *White on Black in South Africa, A Study of English-Language Inscriptions of Skin Colour*. London: Palgrave MacMillan/New York: St Martin's Press, 1993: 84-106.





