“To Be Free Is to Become Almost a Stranger to Oneself”: Writing the White Woman’s Gender Empowerment and Race Disgrace in Two of Nadine Gordimer’s Apartheid Novels

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Abstract Nadine Gordimer’s apartheid fiction evinces a strong interest in the experience of white women of conscience under apartheid. This paper examines her white heroines’ struggle against their gender position to find respectable roles in life and relations with the counter sex. It delves into *Occasion for Loving* (1963) and *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) to compare the status of these women with men, black and white. Their gender roles and relations are taken into consideration in an attempt to figure out inner capacities to challenge the patriarchal practices, at all levels, inherent in South Africa. Embarrassment in their case comes not from the fact of being females but rather from belonging to the white race. Gordimer’s fiction is an open terrain which offers feasible avenues for white women in South Africa particularly and other African societies generally to find appropriate modes of life despite their colonial heritage.
Keywords apartheid fiction; white woman; gender; race; black/ white man **Author Samya Achiri** is Assistant lecturer of literature at Oum El Bouaghi University (east Algeria). Her academic interests include Postcolonial Literatures (African in particular), Didactics of Literature. ““Who Am I?”: Between the Burden of the White House, Clutches of Political Agency and Eagerness for Privacy in Nadine Gordimer’s *Occasion for Loving*” (Forum for World Literature Studies-2015) and ““Silence is not Silent”: A Postcolonial Feminist Appraisal of Women Silence in Mia Couto’s *Confession of the Lioness*” (Journal of Narrative and Language Studies- 2019) are among her publications.

Introduction

Although Nadine Gordimer used during apartheid to think of women's issues as a secondary topic compared to the cause of the day and of feminism at the time as a trivial movement, a close reading of her novels evinces that they have a feminist thrust. Next to her main concern which is unfolding the artificial shell of the Nationalist Government, the issue of penetrating the white female psyche under apartheid is stark. This may stem from her experience as a white woman in a society which perceives women as charming household objects despite their salient competencies. For this reason, she pictures white women of conscience who challenge this stereotypical perception.

Because women are generally seen to fit the domestic realm, their contributions are usually neglected, and hence they are inferiorized. Paradoxically, Gordimer's long apartheid fiction exposes "liberal white female characters" as heroines of the public and domestic spheres. With masculine and feminine roles, her strong-willed women surpass all the expectations. This paper, drawing on the feminist theory and Fanon's psychoanalysis, and reading *Occasion for Loving* (*OFL*) and *The Late Bourgeois World* (*LBW*), assumes that Gordimer's women, owing to this, become more successful than men. It aims to bring to light other gender roles they perform apart from being struggle advocates in comparison with the roles remained for men after their deep involvement in the political debate. Moreover, it examines the nature of the relationships women maintain with men: black and white.

The White Woman / Man: "Gender" Intricacies

In most societies, women are tightly attached to the domestic sphere where they exercise the role of caregivers basically. The social scale is generally hierarchical in which they are placed at its bottom whether at the house, workplace, or other domains. This has been the case of the society Gordimer depicts in her novels and not her heroines. But, this is not to say that they are domestically inactive. Gordimer's white heroines' consciousness grows gradually as they try to form a private identity. Correspondingly, the gender roles they perform increase from one psychological stage of development to another. Bell hooks, likewise, believes that "women [gain] the strength to challenge patriarchal forces" everywhere "[t]hrough consciousness-raising" (8). Gordimer's reflections of gender roles and gender relations in her fiction change noticeably with her change in perception of the political reality of the day. She goes towards stressing the necessity of the female figure in the struggle against the hegemony of the Nationalist Government. By

contrast, Dorothy Driver attributes Gordimer's insistence on women's issues within such a turbulent atmosphere to being a "disadvantaged working group" that is "in a legally subordinate position" (33).

Before being agents in the public sphere, Gordimer's heroines as all women are thoroughly immersed in their domestic roles as wives, mothers, or daughters. And since white men are preoccupied with their political affiliations, women are obliged to be primarily caregivers. Jane flax sees the "domestication of women" as the result of a painful process through which "women learn to live with their oppression" (145). She agrees with hooks that gender roles and power relations are the offspring of the most important unit of socialization which is the family. In the family, the mothers are responsible for instructing their children in their social relations. The girls, like their mothers, have of course readiness to act in the domestic. The hot political atmosphere in this fiction widens the chasm between the white woman and man of conscience and turns their relations extremely problematic. She no more accepts this indifference to their familial life.

Liz in *The Late Bourgeois World* clarifies that "[t]he concept of marriage as shelter remained with [her]" (36). So, when she gets pregnant at eighteen years old, she hurries to marry Max though he "might not have been the man according to specifications" (36). The young Liz wanted to "live a woman's life" (36), to be a woman like her mother and to marry a man like her father. Nonetheless, all she learns from her family proves to be desperately unfitting, for the reality she is confronted with shows that men of her father's kind no longer exist. Max transfers his family duties to his wife Liz who is left to swing between the needs of a newborn baby and the political world she is introduced to trough her husband. Gordimer's portrayal of Max in the novel reveals an indifferent man whose main purpose in life is to defeat the white power. This seems belying, but Max's frequent absences because of his political activities and uncaring attitudes towards his familial life disturb the wife-husband bond. Worst, Liz has to live with, in addition to her loneliness, her pain knowing that her husband indulges in many extra-marital relations. This pushes provokes her to think of avenging herself by trying a couple of affairs: " [t]hese love affairs caused me pain, and in its context I had one or two affairs of my own. I suppose I thought of redressing the balance" (52-3). In bell hooks' view, this can be considered as a challenge to "male sexual behavior" (80).

Although *Occasion for Loving* is set historically before the other novel, it displays similar concerns. Jessie Stilwell does not belong to a revolutionary family in the concrete sense rather to a liberal-minded one "but not radical" (*OFL* 47). Whether activists or liberals, they all belong to the category this paper has referred

to earlier as people of conscience. Jessie also learns from her psychologically disturbed mother that marriage and motherhood constitute a crucial part of any woman's identity. Next to her constant search for "a highly paid, commercial job" (47), household tasks take a great deal of Jessie's time who yearns for some time of privacy. In the other side of the Stilwells' house, there is the husband Tom who is always busy with his liberal project of unfolding a true history of the continent even during the holidays. Jessie also shares with him similar sympathetic attitudes towards the blacks and their cause; yet, she has never overlooked the simplest of her tasks such as playing with their three daughters. Consequently, Jessie realizes that the life "she accepted without question as the definitive one … was not the sum total of her being" (19).

By retaining the domestic undertakings culturally assigned to them, Gordimer's white women are thus extremely feminine. From another angle, however, taking Jane Flax's claim that the public world usually prevails the domestic (162) in addition to the idea that masculinity is attached to the first while femininity to the second and that both concepts are socio-culturally employed to divide gender roles between the public and domestic spheres, Gordimer's women are thus more masculine than feminine. Men abdicate some of their crucial familial roles to women as being the head of the house. This lessens from women's femininity and adds to their masculinity. Because women master the domestic realm besides their important participation in the political debate, these women are also more masculine than men themselves. This is especially evident in the case of Liz who is more deeply involved in the struggle against apartheid compared to Jessie's liberal attitudes. And since "the whole idea of liberation and its possibilities is conceived of in masculine terms" and "[l]iberation and nationhood are contextualized within the male domain" (Sakamoto, "Nadine Gordimer" 228), white women's contribution is empowering, for it makes them assume more masculine roles. Though this contribution is sometimes guided by men, it is as dangerous as theirs since they are also assigned risky missions that may lead easily to prison. Hence, they are not exempt from the close surveillance of the government which does not hesitate to restrict their daily lives.

Adding to that, the economic power which is also by convention contextualized within the male domain is handed over to Gordimer's white women. Men's hectic political life leads their roles as the familial economic force to fade away. Women may take hold of the economic power of their families entirely as they may share it equally with men. Therefore, masculinity of the female characters in this fiction is not solely related to the political domain.

Each of Nadine Gordimer's female protagonists manifests the above criteria to a greater extent even if to differing degrees. While Tom Stilwell's liberal attitudes as a university professor remain mostly theoretical and ineffective, a woman like Jessie concretized her beliefs despite her awareness of her weaknesses as a white woman first and the constraints the white government is responsible for second. By forming a friendship with Gideon Shibalo, a black artist, she challenges herself and the race ideology that was prevalent. Shibalo fills somehow the terrible hole in the Stilwells' familial bonds; he "rounded out the group into a family" (*OFL* 212). More empowering is Jessie's contribution to cater for the economic necessities of the family. Both of Mrs. and Mr. Stilwell work to do so, but this exhibits Jessie with more masculine capacities compared to her husband.

Of the two novels under study, *The Late Bourgeois World* presents the most apparent example of the masculine capacities of Nadine Gordimer's white women in her early fiction. Max's constant absence drives him to yield his main familial task as the head of his family to his wife Liz. Moreover, because of his blind commitment, he cannot spend a long time in the series of jobs he takes. He at last stops working and frees himself completely to his revolutionary cause. The reason according to Liz is "in general, he wasn't equal to the demands he…he took upon himself" (*LBW* 18), that is political actions and familial life. Thus, the masculine task of being the economic force of the family is taken over by Liz. Normally, Max whose "father not only had been a front bencher in the Smuts government but was also a director of various companies" (25) is more powerful than the "little girl … a shopkeeper's daughter from a small town" (25) he marries. This little girl, "'little' was used as indicative of … social standing" (25), becomes more masculine while Max loses most of his masculinity and turns into a woman figure.

Liz's work as a typewriter for the COD, Congress of Democrats, away from being economically empowering is politically as well. It is her outlet to the public world. Being among the staff of such an anti-apartheid organization next to being the wife of a dangerous figure like Max Van Dan Sandt put Liz in a precarious situation similar to her husband's. To sum up, in this small family, Liz, the first to commit herself openly to the struggle against segregation in South Africa in Gordimer's fiction, dominates overwhelmingly both the public and the domestic spheres in her relation with man. She proves how much faithful to the cause she persists by keeping in work to the COD after Max's withdrawal. Her participation is more worthy than her husband's who after his great sacrifices turns to be a state witness unable to endure the torture he is subjected to. This is another instance in the novel where Max loses some aspects of his masculinity. Because both assume

different gender roles, coldness clouds their life, and they end up divorced.

In view of that, white women in this fiction perform important gender roles in their society, and their contribution in the political debate of the day is as significant as men's. These women, Gordimer sees, are a necessary vehicle that makes impossible political actions considerably smooth because they cannot be easily suspected. Certain tasks thus are only women-fitting. And sometimes, they succeed in politics more than their male counterparts. This appears strikingly in *Burger's Daughter* where Rosa is chosen to engage in the role of the fiancée of Noel de Witt. For "it was natural, no one could suspect otherwise. Noel was one of [her] father's known associates" (*Burger's* 65), the mission was successful. This intelligence in the struggle is also evident in *The Late Bourgeois World* through Liz's decision to use her senile grandmother's bank account to help an anti-apartheid banned movement.

Despite that both women and men in Gordimer's fiction perform masculine roles, the male-centric gaze of their society hardly does justice to their involvement. They are looked at as mere expedients in the struggle but never as an equal force. A possible explanation of this patriarchal attitude may be found in Jane Flax's ideas on gender and gender relations. She imputes this sexist thought to the nature of education males receive. They are taught that men "have superior powers of abstract reason (mind), to be the "masters" of nature (including bodies), and to be more aggressive and militaristic" (Flax 173). For this very reason, men appear as monitors of the resistance movement. They do not hesitate to exploit women to achieve their outlined goals under all the circumstances. The white woman, sometimes, is not only colonized by apartheid discourse in South Africa; the patriarchal attitudes males practice are perilously more colonizing. Therefore, next to the political struggle for freedom evident in Gordimer's apartheid fiction, there is women's struggle for gender equality.

Feminist literature artistically configures women as protagonists who "do not readily accept the traditional role of women as decided by society. They are ready to make their own decisions, to express this choice of personal decision-making, and are ready to deal with the consequences of these choices, actions, and decisions" (Lalwani par.4). And so are Gordimer's protagonists. This makes Gordimer's literature 'feminist' despite being overpoweringly political and also despite her denial of any feminist adherence. Gordimer's women are featured in a constant state of development — psychologically , politically, economically…— in parallel with the changing circumstances of the South African life contrary to men who by adhering blindly to a certain political dogma they move subsequently towards their

destruction. This is explicative of why these women succeed in their political and personal lives more than men do.

Not surprisingly then that Gordimer's women seek in the midst of this chaos more personal freedom and sexual liberation. Andrew Ettin sees Gordimer as "a female writer whose intense gaze is directed toward the public as well as private realms of life and one who also has depicted many socially conscious, politically involved, and sexually free female characters" (10). However, because private life refers to the right to do what you want, whenever you want, and under all conditions, Gordimer's females are seen as sexual freedom seekers since this very personal act is also overshadowed by the political system.

Though it should be the first task to be learnt in their lives, white women of conscience turn their attention towards their bodies and their personal needs only when they realize that the upheaval they are caught in cannot be ended in one day and night. Sexuality which is a trivial issue in front of the prejudices of apartheid becomes an indispensable medium to another sense of freedom, access to their bodies namely. This is more suggested by Toshiko Sakamoto in "The Politics of Place and the Question of Subjectivity in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*": "Gordimer explores in her imaginative writing her characters' bodies and their sexuality as the locus of conflict, tension, contradiction and revolt against the white familial values and the social system of apartheid" (264). From bell hooks' standpoint, a means that "calls [women] away from isolation and alienation into community" is sexuality (92). Like political activism, the body in Gordimer's fiction can be a means of empowerment and enslavement at the same time.

Thus, apart from being wives, mothers, or daughters, these females assume also the role of lovers. Gordimer's use of sexuality as a motif in her fiction is adeptly multidimensional. One cannot deny that it (sexuality) is the heroines' way to attain more amusement and to feel more liberated from the realities. But above all, it is used as a medium to come to grips with other mentalities other than the revolutionaries', with other people where "nobody expects you to be more than you are" (*Burger's* 250). Sexual relations in the novels under study have a special tint. Taking their early experiences into account, white women establish relations that can be categorized as anything except marriage. Most important is that these relations do not weigh them down.

In *Occasion for Loving*, a long marital life leads Jessie to question the "purpose of it all" (161). She becomes more convinced "that everything we think of as love — even sex — is nearly always power instead" (*LBW* 156) that makes one side under the authority of another. For this reason, she avoids sexual affairs beyond her

formal marriage. Gordimer presents the liberal-minded Ann Davis as a white female counter figure of Jessie in this novel. This young woman, contrary to Jessie's empty life, enjoys a life full of excitement without duties in the public or domestic spheres. Even to her marriage, she cannot remain faithful with the extramarital affairs she indulges in whenever it is possible.

The failure of Liz's first marriage creates fear from serious relations, yet she manages to please herself with another type of sensual life. The divorce opens up new horizons to get rid of the heavy load this sick marital institution generates. During Max's trial, she is introduced to the lawyer Graham Mill. "[H]e was like one of those doctors with whom you feel that he knows everything about you, simply from a professorial reading of signs you don't even know you exhibit" (36), Liz scrupulously describes him. He is her window to the private life she lives briefly with her husband. By means of this man, she learns how to use her body to enjoy moments of self-liberation, for in this relation she is "the one who has him, helpless" (38). This relation is liberating because it succumbs to no rule. Even if they love each other, they do not marry as they "make a point of not living in each other's pocket" (34). Their meetings are a matter of mood; they meet when they want, and they stay apart when there is no need. Liz delineates the relation she holds with Graham as:

> A sexual connection. But there is more to it than that. A love affair? Less than that. I'm not suggesting it's a new form of relationship, of course, but rather that it's made up of the bits of old ones that don't work. It's decent enough; harms nobody, not even ourselves. I suppose Graham would marry me, if I wanted it. Perhaps he wants it; and then it would all change. (37)

In fact, this relation is something new; "it's not classified" and not "labelled" (34). It is at all sides beneficial. Graham's intellect helps Liz to approach the South African political scene from another angle. She discovers another way whereby the individual remains faithful without belonging avowedly to the movement of resistance. Her job at the Institute for Medical Research can be considered as a new brand of activism. It contributes to wipe out segregation since "blood are [sic] all the same, no matter whom they come from" (37). Through her relation with Graham, Liz who has never left South Africa before gets also the chance to spend a vacation in Europe. The trip is most importantly a journey to the self through which this character learns to live a sensual life apart from all the exigencies. She learns to feel her existence as an independent human being but primarily as a woman. The

motif of journey in Gordimer's fiction reorganizes the shelves of women's selves to make them psychologically more powerful than men. Sensuality does not weaken them; on the contrary, it accords them with more alertness to the demands of their environment.

Most of Gordimer's white women of conscience endure common dilemmas that perplex them along with the readers. What to do and how to act in situations requiring their engagement is unexpected. Liz chooses willingly to carry on working at the Medical Institute dealing with all types of blood, be they black or white. A more dangerous step is her decision towards the end of the novel to aid the black anti-apartheid movement through the account of her dying grandmother. By that, she paves the way to her full political commitment. Jessie also decides to carry on meeting people across the racial line in places like the 'Lucky Star' and 'Tommie's'. The heroines' decision at the end of the novel resembles the author's perception of the dilemma of the female psyche. These women are thus able to step out of their problems whatever their nature might be. This is one of the author's indirect techniques to shed light on the brainpower of her women in order to dispel the myth perceiving them as sensitive creatures whose predicament is mostly gender.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned points and Karen Halil's evaluation of Rosa, in *Burger's Daughter*, as a male figure due to her involvement in the public spectrum and as a traveler-hero who "goes abroad, enjoys sexual trysts, tells stories" (33), the female characters under scrutiny are exceedingly qualified to belong to the same category. In better words, Jessie, in *Occasion for Loving*, next to Liz and Ann, in *The Late Bourgeois World*, are male figures whose masculine tasks, if compared with their male counterparts, are more salient.

The nature of the gender relations that white women create with white men can also be examined in the light of 'friendship' to which Gordimer does not devote enough space. The most possible explanation of this is the milieu these women dwell in which the political overcasts the personal. Forming friendships is reckoned as trivial when viewing the shortage of time and the big number of responsibilities. This fiction includes no clear evidence of the friendship we know in which both sides are committed to each other without benefits. Even the author's use of language — associates, faithfuls, members, liberals, communists… — when describing the relations that bond her characters supports this argument. Jessie Stilwell the protagonist who belongs to the liberal phase of Gordimer's fiction presents us with another reason. She could have formed a friendship with her guest and her husband's friend Boaz Davis, but because both men are of the same nature she hesitates. None of the protagonists, therefore, is able to form a genuine

friendship.

From what has been exposed so far, Gordimer's white female characters cannot be deemed as victims of their gender. They are endowed, despite all the obstacles, by a venturing spirit to reposition themselves. It is the same spirit that led the writer herself to stay in South Africa in the face of censorship laws. Gender, the novels imply, can never be taken as a rationale by women to accept inferiority. On the contrary, it is a point of departure from all sorts of fear.

White Skin, Black Skin: 'Race' Disgrace

The Nationalist Government's racist laws succeeded to separate people in apartheid South Africa into two big headings: blacks and whites. This skin-based separation denotes theoretically the inferiority of one race and the superiority of another. It practically paved the way for the 'inferiority complex' Fanon speaks about to haunt dark-skinned people in their native countries. Acts such as the *Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act* (1949) and the *Immorality Act* (1950) outlaw any sort of relationship that may spring between the two races. In spite of this, the growing consciousness of Nadine Gordimer's white women leads them to a world other than theirs. They cross the color bar, while trying to find a meaning for their existence in South Africa, by coming in touch with other types of black male characters totally different from the servant male figure they used to know. Since the white woman and the black man are aware of all these complications, their relation becomes a worth arena of investigation.

The reasons that drive the black man to form a relationship with the white woman are numerous. Franz Fanon's experience as a black man in a white society bears great resemblance to the situation of the black man in this fiction. According to Fanon, what triggers the black essentially to access the white world is the longing for recognition to free himself from the infernal circle he is thrown to:

> I am overdetermined from without, I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance … Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle. (87-8)

In this quotation, Fanon stresses that this infernal circle is created by the 'fact of blackness.' It is " [a] solidly established myth" and its presence is deferred till "the first encounter" of the Negro with the "white man" (116). As a consequence, he

seeks assimilation to escape the ugliness forcefully associated with blackness: "I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is? " (86). All beauty, oppressed people are taught, lies in the color of their oppressors i.e. whiteness.

To change one's skin is impossible. Hence, looking for viable means to achieve this assimilation becomes the black man's main obsession. He finally envisages the white woman as the only possible form of recognition: "who but a white woman can do this for me? " (45). The white woman is the symbol of purity and innocence of her nation. She is in Robin Visel's words the "vessel for the virtues of "white civilization" in the "heart of darkness" (33). So, to be in love with a white woman is to penetrate whiteness. Fanon's black intellectual Jean Veneuse, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, articulates this persuasively:

> By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man.
>
> I am a white man.
>
> Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization....
>
> I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness.
>
> When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine. (45)

The same ambition of Jean Veneuse who saw France as the appropriate direction to continue his studies possesses Gideon Shibalo, the main black character in *Occasion for Loving*, after getting his B.A. from Fort Hare. He succeeds to win a scholarship to pursue his postgraduate studies in Italy. Unfortunately, because he is black, he is denied the right to have a passport and decides to fight them. And so he does by becoming an activist within the ANC, African National Congress. Shibalo's strong desire to elude his skin color complex is encoded in the series of sexual relations he holds with white women. Her open nature, curiosity to compile knowledge about the aboriginal culture and willingness to defy all the barriers are among the factors that draw Gideon to Ann Davis. She "quickly became as good as the best of the black girls; like them, she could dance with her whole body" (*OFL* 93). This adds to Gideon's fascination with this lively woman who despite all circumstances "was herself, her splendid self, a law to herself" (275). On this ground, he tries to keep her distant from the political world; he "did not want [her] to change … He did not want to see her acquire the cunning and patient temper of a political rebel" (274-5). Ann in return might have seen the picture of the civilized black in Gideon, for he is a teacher and a painter. The 'civilized black' is an oxymoron, and Fanon, through

it, attracts our attention to another contradicting assessment standard. Whites see blackness when they want, and they purposefully ignore it for their own good. He clarifies: " [t]his procedure is quite familiar to colored students in France. Society refuses to consider them genuine Negroes. The Negro is a savage, whereas the student is civilized" (50).

This romance evolves regardless of the surrounding reality. On the one hand, Gid, as Ann prefers to call him, must not have forgotten that blackness is a lifelong biological fact. This is wryly suggested by the author through Ida, a friend of Shibalo, who while organizing his clothes "found paint on a short" and "only wondered, in her practical way, how she would get it off" (*OFL* 134). On the other hand, Ann "did not love him *across* the colour bar" (275, original emphasis) since she does not put this reality into consideration right from the beginning. When she recognizes that his blackness is a real deterrent, she steps back with her husband to England. Shibalo similarly absorbs the impossibility of escaping one's own body and race. Because "[u]nable to be assimilated … he consoles himself by associating with the dead" (Fanon 46). He turns out to be jobless and, most regrettably, a drunkard at the end of the novel.

The black man in Gordimer's apartheid fiction approaches the white woman also for the sake of involving her in the struggle. A stark example is Gideon Shibalo's relation with Callie Stow, a Scotswoman who comes to South Africa to conduct some studies. Yet, her liberal nature leads her to many political adventures and ends up in prison. Of this nature, Stow is the first woman Gideon "had desired … mentally, been drawn to her thought the process of her thinking" (*OFL* 124). She is the woman who constantly reminds him that "a black face didn't necessarily make one — an African" (178). Likewise, Luke Forsake aims basically to reopen contact with Liz for "[p]olitical reasons" (*LBW* 79). Liz, by the time Forsake asks for her help to transfer money from abroad, is already "out of that sort of circle [meaning politics] long ago" (86). Despite this, he insists on her to accept the proposal as he is entirely aware of the failure of the whole mission without the assistance of an experienced white woman. It is an allusion to the outstanding role white women of conscience play in the struggle in the side of both white and black men. This is accentuated by Liz: "[p]erhaps he's talking now in the language I don't understand … telling them he's found a white woman who'll do it" (90).

Sympathy also brings the white woman and the black man closer in Gordimer's fiction. She identifies with the black man as a challenging step to the patriarchal discourse of apartheid. This relation sometimes exceeds mere friendship to be sexual. So, next to being servants, black characters are portrayed as friends, siblings

and, in most intimate cases, lovers. Since these women come to light in a white-male-dominated society and the black man is dehumanized by the laws of the same society, both of them see the white man as their rival.

Jessie Stilwell gets acquainted quickly with Gideon Shibalo's presence in her house and her own life in particular. A kind of friendship grows between the two since Jessie envisions in him a conduit of accompaniment and subversion of the white life standards she does not choose but, like all the whites, she finds herself in the midst. She points: "none of us knows how much getting free of the color bar means to us" (*OFL* 258). The color line in South Africa creates two worlds: one whose people are gifted with "a silver spoon clamped between … jaws" (286), the other is occupied by people who "were born and lived and died before they could come to life" (276). It is the latter that Gideon does not hesitate to describe in his conversations with her. Gideon's situation is reminiscent of the mine workers' Jessie survived nearby during her childhood without being even slightly aware of their suffering. Led by her curiosity and sympathy, she drives through the township Gideon had been raised in. The mode of life was terrifying to Jessie who "found fear in herself at the idea of being allied to this life" (276). Jessie becomes more sympathetic towards Gideon, for he is now not only the victim of a discriminatory system or his white beloved but a whole white colonial society of which she is one.

Taking this into account, this relation can be categorized as a kind of refuge from the disappointment incurred by their own world. For Gordimer's white women of conscience are embarrassed by the segregationist practices of their government and all white people, they abandon all sorts of relations with them. The reaction of Jessie while reading the letter received from the "local residents" after her return from the beach with Gideon is indicative of this; she wonders: " [w]hy is one always having to be so ashamed for these people … I'll never go there again" (293). In the township Ann visits accompanied by Gideon, she finds a refuge from the white gaze that manacles her personal life. The small cottage she sleeps in is magical. She " [wakes] up in the morning with the happiness of waking in a foreign country" (232).

This obscuring relation is also a resort from the curse of their whiteness. Aiming to discover black Africa, Gordimer's white heroines come to understand gradually that their whiteness is the source of their alienation in what is considered as their country. Though they are people of conscience, their whiteness epitomizes the white colonial power. It is a turning moment in their lives when they espouse the alternative of active engagement to eradicate apartheid. Liz passes mistakenly by the industrial area of the city and stops watching a black man conversing with a group of black girl-workers. When their faces meet, he looks "as though [she] wasn't there

at all" (*LBW* 21). Committing herself to the struggle again without laying her yoke neither "on Freud" nor "on Jesus" (12) is her decision to evade these feelings of estrangement.

Whiteness in Gordimer's fiction symbolizes isolation to the white woman and man likewise. In *A World of Strangers*, her second novel, the protagonist is a young Englishman named Toby Hood who despite the strong friendships he maintains with many black men still feels an outsider in South Africa. He concludes that "under a white skin" one cannot get except the "sense of loss" (*A World* 146). It is the same plight the author, a woman of conscience, found herself in the midst. She reveals through her article "Across Time and Two Hemispheres": "I was becoming aware of my growing up in a society, my country, where there was no connection recognized between ourselves, the whites, and the surrounding blacks" (111).

The gap apartheid laws generate between the races exasperates the image of the black man as an 'other.' The mysterious black body as a result becomes a source of fascination, and any connection with it satisfies this sense of enthrallment. Robin Visel interprets this attraction as being merely sexually oriented. She writes: "[f]or her [Gordimer's] heroines, "blackness" is linked to sex" (34). Fanon's experience in France reveals also that " [f]or the majority of white men the Negro represents the sexual instinct … The white women among the whites … view the Negro as the keeper of the impalpable gate that opens into the realm of the orgies, of bacchanals, of delirious sexual sensations" (Fanon 136).

To Jessie, the show of mine dancers is past-revealing. The dancers evoke the picture of the black with his sweat working in the mines, the picture of "a man whose muscles moved independently, like a current beneath the surface of his skin" (*OFL* 32). She acknowledges to Gideon that the black man was "[t]he very first man, the man of the [early] sex fantasies" (258). The grouping of two different bodies is more fascinating for Jessie. She stands watching Ann and Gideon serenely for a long time while sleeping together. In the side of the black body, the white body loses its charisma; Gideon's body has "a shine going down the curve that followed the groove of the spine to the short, gleaming roundness of the buttocks" (254). Ann's growing consciousness of his skin color leads her to appreciate him as a black object first and as a man second. She touches his body with infatuation: "the dark positiveness of his skin … she dwelt on it in secret as soon as she touched him" (183). This stirs up to mind Fanon's white acquaintance's remark to him that "the Negroes … have tremendous sexual powers … They are really genital" (Fanon 121).

Gordimer's attitude towards the issue of sex and politics and their relations to

each other in her fiction remains vague and open to criticism. *The Late Bourgeois World* examines such a critical question. The political impersonated in Luke Forsake, a black character, undertakes a sexual tone to speak with Liz "suggesting that he would like to make love to [her]" (*LBW* 82). Trying to convince herself with his plan, the sexual alternative leaps suddenly to Liz's mind. In case she accepts to be actively engaged in the political scene again, she thinks "it's quite possible he'll make love to [her] …That's part of the bargain" (94). It is not crystal clear if one is the direct upshot of the other, or they are reciprocally interrelated. In a milieu where the political always diminishes the personal, it is very logical to presume that the sexual is no more than the reverberation of the political. However, the answer Gordimer provides to Nancy Topping Bazin's question if "women take political risks for sexual reasons" adds more elusiveness to the whole subject: " [y]es, well, I don't know whether one can generalize about that" (585).

The black man helps the white woman markedly to know herself and to get a satisfactory self-image. Yet, from another angle, due to her skin color prerogatives, she is the active partner. Apparently, Jessie is the most conscious of the two protagonists of this reality. Resembling all the blacks, Gideon Shibalo's helplessness is discernible: "[y]ou had always to do things for them because they are powerless to do anything for you" (*OFL* 207). By closely looking at Ann and Gideon's romance, it can be easily noticed that the white woman is more active physically and mentally than her black partner, for she is the decision maker. Luke Forsake's vulnerability because he cannot afford Liz with nothing save for sexual pleasure, "it's all he's got to offer [her]" (*LBW* 94), puts her in a vantage position. "The lack of self-esteem as an object worthy of love" is one of the paramount factors that trim down the black man's mobility in this relation if not "inhibits and falsifies" it (Fanon 55).

In this regard, all the sorts of relations that grow between the white woman and the black man are doomed to failure. Other novels demonstrate that the reasons are numerous. No matter their allegiance to the black cause, all the whites are bound to "the superior living standards of white civilization" (*LBW* 27) not necessarily politically or economically but basically culturally. Dominant is the component of racial supremacy between the black and the white characters in Gordimer's fiction despite their willingness to suppress or at least escape it. While both hooks and Flax show how human beings are enslaved by their gender, Fanon believes the human being is above all things the slave of his race: "[t]he Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation" (42-3). So, the cross-racial relations do not usually succeed, especially romances, for this complex heightens the misconceptions

between the partners.

Conclusion

Comparing the gender roles and power relations the white heroine of Nadine Gordimer's apartheid fiction forms with the black and white man, the paper has elicited the subsequent remarks. Whereas the formalities connecting the white woman and the white man are generally dictated by the standards of their society, she voluntarily tends to be with the black man. The last in all the cases is short-lived, yet it permeates her memory. It constitutes a pivot in her life towards development at all levels. The white man allows her to pierce the public sphere and so does the black man. But whilst the first is a rival, the second is a victim by means of his "fact of blackness," a factor that leads usually to countless, disastrous effects. The woman's consciousness increases gradually to figure out the complexity her skin color enormously inflicts on her living in South Africa. She is not embarrassed by being a female rather by belonging to the white minority. Hence, she becomes culpable on account of her white skin albeit being a woman of conscience. In arguing that the white woman is not a weak partner to her white counterpart, the paper tallies not with the claims of many critics. Her challenging spirit enables her to step out all the incarcerating societal norms to be stronger than him in diverse occurrences. In both cases, she is a stranger to herself. With the white man, she is absolutely so because she confronts herself first by eliminating her apprehensions. She defies all the taboos and the picture of the traditional woman. Thus, for she reconstructs a new self-image, she is a stranger to her old self in a positive sense. With the black man, the strangeness is the ramification of her attempts to deny all the privileges endowed by her skin i.e. to be a stranger to her race. To be able to live in her country, she must free herself from the sense of being the victimizer. Accordingly, *Occasion for Loving* and *The Late Bourgeois World* offer feasible avenues for white women in South Africa particularly and other African societies generally to find appropriate modes of life despite their colonial heritage.

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