

**AN INVESTIGATION OF COLONIALISM IN THE NOVELS OF
NADINE GORDIMER AND ANITA DESAI**

**BY
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate colonialism in the novels of Nadine Gordimer and Anita Desai. A further purpose is to introduce these two major writers to a wider audience, thereby illuminating not only their work but also the artistic, social and moral assumptions on which it rests.

A comparative study of the novels of Gordimer and Desai shows how these writers, from socially and culturally different countries, reflect and explore colonialism. By locating this phenomenon of world history in Post-Colonial Literary Studies the project calls for a discussion of the various critical models of post-colonial writing. In consequence, the study moves beyond the dichotomy of east-west and centre-periphery to a reading of Gordimer's and Desai's novels at several levels, with a particular focus on India's special experience of colonialism – both at home and abroad - and Gordimer's status as a white South African.

From this perspective evolves the notion that Desai and Gordimer reveal through their texts patterns of similarity and difference in their respective colonial encounters.

If we were to search for a writer from Africa whose being and writing have been directly involved with issues pertaining to the historical phenomena of colonialism and race struggle over an extended period, then Gordimer must be the ideal candidate. She is a writer deeply bound up with the multiple phases and consequences of South African apartheid. Also, she is someone who tries to go beyond history to

depict the conscience of the age by writing about the human condition in times of terror and fear.

A contemporary analysis of the human condition is a concern that Gordimer and Desai share as writers of fiction. The agony of a post-colonial India that tries to liberate itself from the dialectic of history is reflected in Desai's novels in the framework of "difference on equal terms". This places her in the "second generation" of Indo-English writers who write from the hybridised and syncretic view of the modern world that celebrates cultural cross-pollination.

A special achievement of Gordimer and Desai is to succeed in powerfully portraying female characters in a rapidly changing world, though each writer explores the place of women in society from her own cultural perspective.

Writers are transmitters of their cultures. A study of this kind, I hope, will help to stimulate interest and enjoyment in the reading of South African and Indian literature and thus strengthen the literary bond of understanding between the two countries.

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Elizabeth Thomas
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my children, Pramod and Anpu.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, hereby submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the North, has not been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other university; that it is my own work in design and in execution, and that all material contained therein has been duly acknowledged.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: COLONIALISM

The field of Postcolonial Studies has become diverse in scope and emphasis. While scholars like Edward Said map colonialism and its cultural impact as an historic global phenomenon, others examine the literary response to it in particular countries. This study embarks on a comparative examination of South Africa and India that seeks to reveal through the texts of Anita Desai and Nadine Gordimer patterns of similarity and difference in their colonial encounters. The comparative approach of interpreting writing from former colonies on different continents, while revealing shared patterns of colonial experience, also reveals a variety of colonial styles and practice and thus a diversity of literary response. Thus, while respecting the differences of race, social circumstance and literary culture, the study examines points of common reference as it asks what current expressions have significance for societies struggling beyond colonialism towards identities of full independence.

This chapter discusses colonialism in a post-colonial context. It begins with a survey of the theoretical and historical aspects of colonialism. The different colonial experiences as encountered in India and Africa considered in the course of the chapter emphasise the wide range of variation in the nature and history of colonialism. The concluding part of this section introduces Gordimer and Desai as fiction writers engaged in debates dealing with contemporary topics initiated by their changing circumstances.

Among the many events of the twentieth century, one of the most spectacular was the dismantling of European overseas empires.¹ Colonies

established under European domination achieved independent statehood, sometimes through peaceful and sometimes through violent struggle. But decolonisation was both a problematic notion and a potential disenchantment. Indeed colonial relationships persist today – for example, in Northern Ireland, on the West Bank in Israel, and in many other parts of the world. Indigenous colonialisms characterise the relationships among people in many countries. Moreover, as communication networks shuttle information instantly world-wide and multinational corporations reorganise the flow of capital, labour, and control over national borders in the name of globalisation, a process of modern colonial-imperialism seems to be taking place. Nineteenth-century imperial expansion, the outward and dominating thrust of Europeans into the world beyond Europe, which began during the early Renaissance, was underpinned in complex ways by the assumptions of territorial acquisition and political control.

Various reasons have been put forward to account for European imperialism. They include the march of Western civilisation, the progress of science and technology, “a fit of absence of mind,”² to name a few from the Europeans themselves. From less Eurocentric points of view, we find the following: raw instincts for profit of the kind which drew travel-adventurers like John Hawkins to Africa for gold, diamonds, ivory and, most lucrative of all, cheap labour for plantations; the complexity of local circumstances, such as those the East India company met with in the eighteenth century when “the British trading concern was caught in the chain-drive of Indian power politics”;³ fierce European rivalry which resulted in the intensive scramble for Africa; and “persuasive means” such as colonial education and colonial cities, much more effective than physical force and direct control, which were used to maintain the empire’s extensive territorial and commercial interests.⁴

Yet, to probe the many sides of “persuasive means” is to render the achievement of the dissolution of colonialism almost irrelevant. The inauguration of a modern post-colonial era created high hopes for independent countries; but such optimism was short-lived, as the extent to which the Western powers had not relinquished control became clear. This continuing Western influence, located in the political, social, economic and ideological spheres, has been named “neo-colonialism” by the Marxists, apparently suggesting that the advanced countries are continuing to interfere in the lives of erstwhile colonies as if they had not been liberated. In any case, the implication is that colonialism lingers, in the form of relationships between the First World and the Third World, the International Monetary Fund, English or French education, but the process itself can be seen as yet another manifestation of imperialism.

Imperialism and colonialism both have their negative connotations - those of over-weening ambition and self-aggrandisement, the very antithesis of humanitarianism – for which they are little admired. Ronald Hyam, in *Britain's Imperial Century* (1993), refuses either to use the term imperialism or even to discuss the phenomenon. The same tendency prevails among critics of colonialism; they either avoid the term or isolate some idea that fits into their notion and value judgement and then say, "This is colonialism". But this situation is not so discouraging as it appears. New fields of enquiry already in place – colonial discourse analysis and post-colonial studies - enable us to work out meanings and definitions, locating them within institutional contexts, tracking them in Marxism, feminism, subaltern studies, and to remove the layers of complexity attached to the term.

Nor can the study of colonialism be limited to set periods. The term is elusive and the contexts in which it was employed changed constantly from its original meaning of occupation of land until it acquired a more modern meaning. Many of the old meanings still survive, while new meanings,

instead of defining the term precisely, widen its conceptual definition giving it an eclectic nature. So any attempt to work towards a theory of colonialism is based on discourses of the empire of the modern period, with the understanding that structural and thematic connections can be made with colonialism of the ancient periods as well. Authors who comment usefully on this phenomenon and who are persuasive in their theoretical arguments include Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Robert Young and Anthony Pagden. The current critical consensus is thus that these cultural historians have subjected the term to original and sceptical scrutiny.

Theoretical Aspects

In the last few years, since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), there have been signs that scholars, and especially cultural critics, are moving towards a common concept of colonialism. Said shifted the study of it towards its discursive operations, showing the intimate connection between language and forms of knowledge developed for the study of cultures and the history of colonialism and imperialism. This meant that the kinds of concepts and representations used in literary texts, travel writings, and academic studies across a range of disciplines could be analysed as a means of understanding the diverse purposes of the process of colonialism.

In his generalised account, Said defines Orientalism as:

the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it, in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.⁵

On another occasion he speaks of it as “a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient”⁶, arguing that all western knowledge,

directly or indirectly, is a form of colonial discourse. This idea, claims Said, has been reinforced by Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987), which has provided the most comprehensive demonstration to date of the way in which an apparently non-political academic discipline, classics, has its own cultural and political history - in this case racism and Eurocentrism. After Said's impressive demonstration that Orientalism is a hegemonic Western discourse, deploying a variety of strategies that guarantee a position of superiority for the Westerner *vis-à-vis* the Orient, it is not uncommon to find cultural critics using the term Orientalism as a synonym for colonialism.⁷ Apparently, even if Said had not spelt it out, what he meant was that colonialism is a system of control by a country over a dependent area or people outside its borders. In the case of Orientalism, knowledge had been used as the "prime imperial auxiliary,"⁸ to quote Dennis Porter who regards *Orientalism* as a feasible text for starting a dialogue between western and non-western cultures, or, to use the colonial terminology, between the colonist and the colonised.

If Orientalism is seen by Said as a way of maintaining unequal (international) relations, in his later book, *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), he takes a different tack:

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and even impelled by expressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and *beseech* domination as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination.⁹

The notion of beseeching domination is a departure from some of the usual features of colonial situations: forcible domination of an alien minority, asserting racial and cultural superiority, and, notably, enforced dislocation of people by capitalistic and exploitative colonial forces. To support the ideology of 'beseeching domination' Said attempts a compromise by saying: "the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with

such words and concepts as 'inferior' or 'subject races' 'subordinate peoples', 'dependency', 'expansion', and 'authority'.¹⁰ However, the historian DK Fieldhouse was nearer the truth when he said: "The basis of imperial authority was the mental attitude of the colonist. His acceptance of subordination – whether through a positive sense of common interest through the parent-state or through inability to conceive of any alternative - made empire durable."¹¹ Although Fieldhouse was discussing white colonists in the Americas, his general point goes beyond that to a global level. At the same time, he concludes that in the 'idyllic relationship' between the rulers and the ruled, there was widespread reference to 'us' and 'them'.

The 'us' and 'them' pattern of colonialism, however, was not only based on authority-subject status. It was also racial. The 'Hindoo', the Native American, the African, in the imaginative and cognitive space of the Europeans, were "distinct and separated from our species"¹² because of skin colour. This fantasy about racial otherness, traceable to Biblical times, is posited as the cause of modern slavery. It was useful neither to the dominating group, for they could do nothing from virtue, nor to the subjected, as it kept them permanently on the periphery. The consequence of such a relationship, it is sometimes suggested, created entire societies slavish in their character. One can observe this mentality among erstwhile colonial and colonial societies in their persistent mimicry of the metropolis. VS Naipaul, the Trinidad-born writer, tells of the characteristic feature of this mimicry: "One of the terrible things of being a colonial is that you must accept so many things as coming from a great wonderful source outside yourself and outside the people you know."¹³ Anyone who has considered this matter of race seriously has clearly recognised that skin colour and behaviour are unrelated. In the light of Naipaul's argument, it may be said, if colonials are trapped in the hopeless mimicry of their 'protectors', it is an instance of where *mission civilisatrice* and the 'white man's burden' of guardianship turned into an ugly paradox of mimicry.

One explanation for this paradox lies in the ambivalent nature of colonial authority, an exposition of which is given in Homi Bhabha's essay 'Of Mimicry and Man' (1984). Ambivalence is a key word for Bhabha, taken from psychoanalysis, where it was developed to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite ("simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action"). In his view, colonial mimicry is the desire for something, "a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite".¹⁴ Ironically, in making ambivalence the heart of his analysis, he in effect performs a political reversal in which the periphery - the Other, the borderline, the doubtful - becomes the equivocal, the indefinite, the indeterminate ambivalence that characterises the centre. Bhabha arrives at this conclusion through a series of analyses of colonial texts - governmental decrees, official reports, and missionary accounts which become hybridized when placed in alien contexts. His illustration of a Christian missionary trying to teach Indian Hindus about the Christian communion service is an exposition of such a contradiction: the missionary is confounded when he finds that the vegetarian Hindus react with horror to the idea of eating Christ's body and drinking his blood. Suddenly it is the white missionary who is turned into a cannibalistic vampire.¹⁵ If Said shows that unequivocal relations are the essence of Orientalism, Bhabha demonstrates that oscillation/ambivalence is also an easily identifiable feature of colonialism.

Slightly differing, but somewhat related in thinking, is post-colonial culture theorist Robert Young's construction of colonialism in *Colonial Desire* (1995). He looks at colonialism as a kind of machine and argues that, "like Adam Smith's economic and historical machines, colonialism is also a determining, law governed process; its workings get attached to those of the historical and economic machines."¹⁶ The machine metaphor not only describes the historical development of capitalism in non-capitalist regions,

but also explains rather well the violent ways in which colonial practices were inscribed both physically and psychically on the territories and peoples subject to colonial control. Franz Fanon offers a complementary perspective by calling it "the enterprise of deculturation"¹⁷ - the practice by which land and body are brought under control – thereby including in it the colonialism of commerce and culture, a colonialism derived from population surpluses, and finally imperial space for the expansive nature of culture. According to Rodney, Patmore, Young and many others, this historical system of domination fuelled the infamous Scramble for Africa and the conquest of the East and the Pacific. Each of these moments suggests that colonialism above all involves the physical appropriation of land and its capture, mainly for the appropriation of another culture, suggesting that in the socio-geopolitics of colonialism, land and culture are interrelated.¹⁸

All these theories and definitions of colonialism, though couched in terms of value and emotion, have attracted much attention. Now that major colonial control is at an end, it is possible to approach colonial systems through their results. No one disputes the fact that the rise and fall of colonial empires has changed dramatically the human geography of the planet. One set of theorists call it a melancholy process and argue that it resulted in such painful events as mass forced migrations, the destruction of entire peoples, social disintegration, cultural impoverishment, loss of identity, division and conflict.¹⁹ Defenders of colonialism have been challenged; left-wing analysts find nothing but evil in colonialism and denounce it. Yet for more moderate present-day generations living in independence after the end of empire, there are some comforting legacies of colonial-imperial interaction. Anthony Pagden in *Lords of all the World* (1995) describes what colonial-imperialism has bequeathed to the modern world:

... new nations, Creoles and mixed races, people who had been born and reared in colonies and whose futures, and sense of identity, were markedly those of the invaders or the societies of the Aboriginal populations. In its final state it also

created new states, and new political forms, or renewed and transformed versions of older political types... Colonialism also created the trade routes and lines of communication which have been responsible for a slow erosion of the ancient divisions, natural and cultural, between peoples. For those routes, which once carried, often indigent, Europeans out, have more recently carried ever-increasing numbers of non-Europeans back.²⁰

Finally, what Said, Bhabha, Young and Pagden offer here is a way of theorising the socio-cultural and geo-politics of colonialism as an agnostic, hegemonic, reformed, inventive, integrative narrative of repulsion and desire. While providing an overall theoretical paradigm, these enquiries into the phenomenon of colonialism look at various colonialisms or systems of domination operating historically. The new forms of representation, apparent in feminist theories, speak of a universally colonised "woman" subjected to patriarchal oppression. Theorists such as Bell Hooks, Elizabeth Spellman and Gayatri Spivak have been quick to take this up and include in it the history of the excluded, the subalterns, especially the 'voiceless' women who were subjected to what is today often called a "double colonisation".²¹ This has led to increasing comparisons between patriarchy and colonialism. Thus the literature of colonialism is not only wide-ranging and diverse, reflecting the changing nature of colonial problems and the general aspects of colonialism; it also deals in a number of instances with post-colonial subjects and problems of decolonisation, though still offering an unusually rich field of enquiry into many other areas.

The era of colonialism is far too recent for any definitive and objective assessment of it to be possible. A few salient points may, however, be tentatively put forward.

- (1) Colonialism imposed alien and authoritarian regimes on subordinate societies. These regimes tended to train subjects in passive acquiescence.

- (2) Although for long periods passive acquiescence was indeed largely attained, as colonialism advanced it also stimulated nationalist agitation and organisation.
- (3) Anti-colonial forces derived their inspiration from colonial teachings and for the most part adopted western forms of organisation.
- (4) Colonialism paved the way for new thinking. Ideas and forms of knowledge originated in imitation of the West ended in invention motivated by the impulse of commitment.
- (5) Finally, colonialism has been reflected in colonial transactions as the clashes and collaborations of many cultures and identities affecting and rejuvenating both coloniser and colonised.

Comparative Studies:

Collisions and Compromises

Too often the impression has been fostered that "colonialism is a political-economic phenomenon beginning about the year 1500 whereby various European nations discovered, conquered, settled, and exploited large areas of the world."²² Thus a uniquely European invention. In truth, its study is massively broad, involving the histories of perhaps all nations, and the collisions, compromises and comings together of many different cultures, and more importantly, reflecting how different parts of the globe have interacted with each other over time. The notion of compromise will remain a recurring element in the present research that focuses on India and South Africa, erstwhile colonies which are at present trying to take control of their destiny by ridding themselves of the vestiges of European colonialism.

India

Shakespeare, in *Henry VIII*, uses India as a synonym for wealth. The Duke of Norfolk, describing the Field of the Cloth of Gold, tells the Duke of Buckingham:

Today, the French,
All clinquant, all in gold, like heathen gods,
Shone down the English; and, tomorrow, they
Made Britain, India; every man that stood
Show'd like mine. (*Henry VIII*, I, i)

However, it was Christopher Marlowe who first brought an Oriental hero to the English stage in his *Tamburlaine the Great*. He describes the Orient as a land of wealth and powerful rulers. He promises his future bride, Zenocrate, riches from the East beyond human dreams (I.ii).

Also, Tamburlaine dreams of extending his power "from the bounds of Afric... to the banks of Ganges"(IV.i.110-30). Implanting colonies in the Gangetic plain inspired him; and for Marlowe's British successors it was a worthwhile exercise in imperialism from which they could not extricate themselves.

Clearly, the Elizabethans did not doubt that they were in contact with powerful civilisations in the East, possibly more skilled and sophisticated than their own. Prodigious wealth marked the stories about India circulating then in England. A generation later, Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* (1654). His description of Satan sitting like an emperor "high on a gallery, with a canopy over him and a carpet before him..." fits more an oriental king than a European monarch. Sources record that he knew Sir Thomas Roe, an emissary of the British government in the Mughal court, so it is likely that his information was first-hand and authentic. By the late seventeenth century,

India had so thoroughly entered into the European consciousness that Dryden, impressed by the ostentatious wealth of the Mughal court and the political and administrative structure of the empire, wrote a long verse-drama *Aureng Zebe* (1675) about the last of the great Mughal emperors. Truly, by then, India had become a subject of literature and a theme for social comment by writers, travellers, politicians, and merchants.

This image of India, however, underwent a slow change when it gradually became a colony. India in the pre-colonial era - before it came under European domination - was a wealthy competitor in world markets. When one reads European accounts of India from the early modern age, one gets the impression of reading a first world description, to use a contemporary term, written by people from less fortunate climes. Then imperial political domination, which thought it natural to show superiority over the inhabitants of the land, reduced the country to penury and the psyche to fracture. India has often both actively and passively survived conquests, but British colonisation looms as a constant frame of reference even though India can boast of a civilisation many thousands of years old. Here lies the complexity of this encounter. As the present ex-colonial generation pines for a vanished age, fret and fume about cultural confusion, shout about discriminatory labels such as 'subject' and 'other' and are puzzled over identity, it is an enlightening journey to move through time and trace the history of conquests and invasions and ask who colonised the Indians most, and what impact they had on them.

India is a racial mixture with almost all the major ethnic groups represented there. During the neolithic period inhabitants from the Mediterranean area entered India and are said to have brought in an important culture.²³ The megalithic culture of southern India is associated with this arrival. In roughly the second millennium there was another invasion, this time by Aryans - tall, fair meat-eaters from Central Asia - who became dominant in northern India.

The rich alluvial soil of the land attracted many more invaders: Saracens, Scythians, Huns and Greeks. Many of the invading groups, including the Arab invaders of the fourteenth century, melted and merged into the social fabric of India without upsetting the homogeneity of the land built through the centuries by Hinduism, a philosophy which bases its principles on cultural development through synthesis and absorption. Jawaharlal Nehru was aware of this when he wrote in *The Discovery of India* (1946): "Some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilisation."²⁴ This Indian unity was shattered when the modern invading groups, namely, the Europeans, saw Indian society as a mosaic of different interests, communities and peoples. The British, the last of the invaders, perceived that Hindus and Muslims were two mutually antagonistic monoliths, with distinct social identities. Hindu-Muslim rivalry and the eventual partition of India were the end result of this notion.

The European conquests of India - first by the Portuguese, then by the French and the Dutch - began in the seventeenth century and were virtually completed in the mid-nineteenth century by the British. When the English East India Company made a bid for political power in the eighteenth century, the Mughal empire that once exercised control of the greater part of the sub-continent had already been reduced to a shadow. Several princely states were fighting for supremacy and the company entered the fray to secure and enhance their commercial gains. Trade, commerce, glory and social advancement were the initial motives behind the invasions.

Thus, the British Indian empire was acquired, not in a fit of absentmindedness, as has been sometimes alleged, but in pursuit of the public and private greed of the East-India company's servants.²⁵ In the words of a certain British historian, imperialism was "actuated by the love of plunder and the spirit of conquest"²⁶ and this systematic plunder was one of the causes of the famine of 1770. The reason why infant marriage and *Sati*

were common in those days was that the people lived in mortal fear of rapacious plunderers. Folksongs, poetry and artwork in every part of the sub-continent record memories of misery and suffering. The advent of *pax Britannica* after the 1857 Rebellion proved no better than the Company's rule. It completed the period of conquest and imperialism for the British and for the Indians, the painful experience of deculturation, depopulation, oppression and humiliation. The Crown, which considered itself (as) an instrument of peace, instead of bringing peace and stability, drove the people to rebellion in many parts of the country. The experience of conquest was so horrendous throughout India that Ghulam Hussain, a poet-historian of colonial times, described how his countrymen were groaning under the Crown's yoke, and even Nirad C. Chaudhuri, historian, novelist, poet and an admirer of the *Raj*, described the British in India as "the Nazis of their time".²⁷

The multiple issues surrounding colonialism reflected in art and literature, especially economic, moral, spiritual and cultural degradation, are so profound and deep-rooted that it is not surprising they arouse passionate debate. PJ Marshall writes in the introduction to *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (1995) that even the British are not unanimous about their imperial past. For some, the empire embodied the highest qualities of Britishness, while for others it spoke of excesses in distant lands and a betrayal of British ideals of freedom.

Since, as writers on empire say, British India had been the creation of a commercial society, it could be said that India brought profit for the British. Also, one might add, constitutional maturity on a significant scale as a result of governing a land as large as Europe itself and ruling a huge population whose history and culture date from antiquity. India compelled Britons to evolve a whole new philosophy of empire: from trusteeship through utilitarianism and imperialism to racial equality.

For India, British conquest was just another invasion, which brought in English education, custard pudding, neckties and railways for the teeming population. Nevertheless, the irony is that while British history can be written with only a casual reference to, say, the 1857 Mutiny, and to the proclamation of Queen Victoria as the Empress of India, Indian history cannot be written without mention of the British rule over two hundred years. For the consequences of British colonialism in its various guises (hybridity, internal division and conflict among them) are far too many to assess and measure.

When British rule was withdrawn in 1947, India was well prepared for a role in the modern world. But the British left behind such enormous domestic problems – poverty, debt, division, ignorance, illiteracy and stagnation - that even a balanced and enlightened statesman like Jawaharlal Nehru had to turn to other western and Russian models for India's development. Salman Rushdie's Moor's sighs (*The Moor's Last Sigh* 1994) are India's sighs that emanate from seeing the country plunged into communalism, factionalism, materialism and greed. Despite the attempts to shake them off, these vestiges of the *raj* are very much present in the life of the sub-continent today. It is difficult to foresee an early end to such legacies of the colonial past, especially when the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims was converted at the state level into the Indo-Pakistani conflict. On the positive side, the aspirations towards democracy, economic growth, and social equity that emerged in the colonial era through liberation struggles are now integral to the consciousness of the sub-continent's population. Of all the vaunted ideologies these three ideas have best withstood the vagaries of time.

Africa

While dissecting the anatomy of change in Africa, the writer and critic Toyin Falola wrote that colonial rule is "nothing if not about change, in spite of Africa's continuity with the past. Today English-speaking Africa cannot be defined without this legacy." Africans had, he added, to cope with rapid changes, some too fast for their comprehension, and many others significant, but too slow to be noticed.²⁸

Falola's observation is not isolated. Change, for example, was thrust upon Chinua Achebe's Umuofia (*Things Fall Apart* 1959) in a violent form by the forces of colonialism, and one painful consequence was the breakdown of the Igbo society. For the committed Marxist writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, colonial education brought discord to the land and was responsible for the deracination of the English-educated African.²⁹ Acting upon his convictions, he has, since *Petals of Blood* (1977), turned away from English as a literary medium and chosen to write his plays and novels in Gikuyu, his mother tongue. During the early years of the century, with colonisation an established fact, chroniclers such as Akiga Sai of the Tiv, Samuel Johnson of Yorubaland and Sol Plaatje of South Africa were already talking of a dying past. Certain changes were so decisive as to mark a major break with the past: these included the monetisation of society, commercialisation of the land, introduction of Africa into the world economy, the use of English, and the introduction of western education, aesthetics, sports and medicine.

But there are other matters for concern. Colonial rule was not simply the westernisation of Africa and the introduction of new languages. Border disputes, mismanagement of power and the politicisation of languages that often ends in ethnic wars are other problems that cause considerable disenchantment across the continent. A revival of pre-colonial traditions and

the promotion of indigenous languages would not serve contemporary needs, as the substantial imprint of colonial changes had already appeared within a short period. The relevance of the past cannot be denied, considering Africa's rich cultural heritage, nor can the shock and turmoil be minimised by underplaying European conquest as a small episode in Africa's long history.

In the context of this more circumscribed approach with regard to change, visible and conceptual, three areas of experience and production which seem important in the post-colonial African society will be discussed here – the use and development of a new language, namely English; social formations of the region; and the construction of place.

In speaking of language, the reference is to the adoption of English as the official language and as a creative medium in the British colonised regions. As stated above, this has given rise to several different responses, positive and negative, to the history of colonialism. Falola's reference to "English speaking Africa", on the face of it appears harmless, and quite limited, but even limited attention to the problems of language reveals the working out of a subtle kind of colonialism. Where language is concerned, most African societies emerge from oral cultures in which the very nature and function of language is different from western traditions, inheriting, say, from the written word. English-speaking Africa, with part of its roots in an entirely different intellectual and cultural climate is in the border zone of a cultural reality where knowledge and identity are in constant flux, and its imaginings of that society, in a powerful way, nevertheless become a part of that reality.

This has no doubt given birth to resonant imaginings of cultural experience that have paved the way for a vibrant modern written literature in Africa. But this literature remains essentially elitist, thereby limiting its relevance for the development of a secular society and healthy inter-group relations. In Africa

there is a struggle over language – a wrestling with its power to construct reality and a political intervention in that process of construction. And this occurs in post-colonial societies whether English is a ‘mother tongue’ or ‘other tongue’. In such situations English-speaking Africa, with its unifying simplicity, becomes problematic, as the term rather than affirming unity suggests and displays the strong assertion of anglo-centricism in post-colonial debate.

The point to note here is that if we recognise that language is an instrument of domination and a vehicle of power, it is in this very instrument (the English language) that imperialism and the history of colonialism emerge. In other words, English as the language of creative imagination, concealed in such labels as ‘post-colonial literatures’, or ‘new writings in English’, is the direct consequence of colonialism. As a post-colonial discourse it communicates re-imaginings of social cultures with colonial interventions in its aesthetic and in its standards of correct usage.

In the process of such transformation, for instance, the English language is *appropriated* to new uses. The Indian writer Raja Rao’s definition of appropriation, as described in *Kanthapura* (1938), is brought in here for the sake of explanation. According to Rao, appropriation is the process by which the writer attempts to “convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.”³⁰ It, in fact, demonstrates that language is taken and moulded by the requirements of the user (whether in Africa, India, SE Asia or North America for that matter). But while appropriation takes place, in for example, code-switching or vernacular transcription, the forms and techniques of English are effectively adapted to different pasts, traditions and requirements, bringing spectacular results in the process. The rich and diverse body of literature produced from Africa sums up the outcome of such language appropriation.

However, the history of the spread of English is not inseparable from the history of colonialism. In "Ruins of a Great House" (1962) Derek Walcott, the Caribbean poet, projects the tensions and dilemmas of the bitter colonial history of the Caribbean. Walcott's views on colonial subjectivity are not isolated. The subject of the brutal tearing away from one's own culture and history is made the quest themes of the Barbadian poet Brathwaite, in *Masks* (1968) and *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (1973). The bulk of the stories of South African black writers such as James Matthews, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex la Guma and Can Themba display the spectacular ugliness of the South African (colonial and apartheid) situation in all its forms: "the colonial domination and oppression, the brutality of the Boer, the hypocrisy of the English speaking liberal, terrible farm conditions, the disillusionment of the educated African, poverty of African life and a host of others."³¹ While the white South African writers feature in their writing socio-historical mutations occurred living in a colonial-apartheid society.

To state briefly the spectacle of change: by grappling with a colonial history and moving beyond the confines of intellectual inheritance, African writers are able to reclaim for literature African subjects and themes while appropriating the English language to "a new English... altered to suit its new African surroundings".³² The desire to assert an Africaness in literature and language is probably responsible for taking up this challenge.

The second area in which we see change at the conceptual and physical levels is in the patterns of social formations by which Africa is interpreted. The reference here is not to social institutions but how Africa is constructed by colonial-imperialist assumptions. In the European imagination Africa is, for example, the mysterious location of King Solomon's mines, of unused and untold wealth, ready to be brought back to its proper home. In some of the early texts Africa forms no real part of a developmental world. Curiously, the continent still retains much of this paradoxical conflict in the European

imagination, which attests to the point about binaries that is being discussed in the study.

As anecdotal evidence for this peculiarly constructed feature, one could give a number of instances. It is still, for example, much easier to get African books in London and New York than it is in Africa. Apart from the crisis in book distribution in many African states, this situation is rather instructive: western domination of the publishing world is a specific instance of the persistence of imperial structures.³³ A curious anachronism is the constructed relationship where it is easier for African states to build a relationship with the “centre” than with each other. So the representation of each in the other’s eyes is that constructed by the gaze of the Other: and Africa still allows itself to be the vulnerable place where colonial intentions are practised.

But when considering the binaries, the notion of race comes down to the most talked about of binarisms – that of black and white - a binarism, as Bill Ashcroft dryly notes, “fundamental to the maintenance of colonial control.”³⁴ His argument is that both black and white are traversed by ranges of ethnicity so diverse and intertwined that they can never be unravelled. Both are constituted of subjects that are in constant deferral of what race might mean. At the same time in an apparent reversal of or resistance to power, xenophobic utterances (Africa for Africans, Black Power, White Power, White Writing) are often heard that seem to keep binarism itself in place.

In the debates on changing Africa, the concept of place continues as a key area for discussion because many consider that “The patchwork of British (colonial) rule is the foundation of many countries in modern Africa.”³⁵ The simplest testimony to this patchwork is the map of Africa itself. It was drawn and redrawn by European powers as a true reflection of their political interests during the second half of the nineteenth century. There is a firm

commitment to these boundaries by most of Africa and by international organisations such as the Organisation of African Unity and the United Nations. Yet the artificiality of the exercise - "drawing lines on maps where no white man's foot ever trod"³⁶ - rather than bringing unity and stability reduced a large number of pre-colonial states to a few countries. Disputes arising from the partition of ethnic groups between different countries have led to a series of political problems, including the well-known aggression in Uganda, the prolonged warfare in Sudan and the ongoing internal conflicts in the Republic of Congo and Ethiopia.

Place is, as stated above, an important written and re-written concept where colonial-imperial history and colonial language have created everlasting embarrassment and tension among the people of Africa. Naipaul makes this clear in *The Middle Passage* (1968) when he sees Caribbean history signified in the land: "There is slavery in the vegetation. In the sugarcane, brought by Columbus, on that second voyage when, to Queen Isabella's fury, he proposed the enslavement of the Amerindians"(61-62). The conflict of colonised and coloniser to which Naipaul refers in light-hearted vein here is a simplified version of the complex way history is embedded in place. The same process of history being written is greatly evident in the process of "worlding" by which colonised regions are shifted to the edge and inscribed as the 'other' part of the "world", or the 'Third World'.³⁷

Place is thus a palimpsest on which the imperial language attempts to erase the previous inscription and inscribe its own linguistic construction. Modern Africa, divided into nation-states, as depicted in the article "Africa" in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire* (1995), is an imperial construct that continues to show colonial inscription. Of course, whether Africa can do without the state or not is a matter for debate in Africa alone. Nkrumah's idea of Pan-Africanism or a unified Africa is still perhaps a workable option to erase the unresolved tensions caused by colonial maps.

But the process would not be a simple one because the rewriting may be contested at every point since the struggle over place in Africa is also a struggle over language, over culture, and over politics too. But at least the problematics in the concept of state may be “appropriated” and perhaps consolidated, by a post-colonial consciousness that takes into consideration the heterogeneous nature of social experience that Africa characterises.

To conclude: (1) the perceived change in Africa revolves less on the fact of change than on its interpretation. (2) Modern Africa is a consequence of colonialism. (3) In the conception of place, in the adaptation of the English language, and in the analysis of social formations, modern Africa comes into being through a constant dynamic of colonial power and its resistance. (4) An understanding of post-colonial social formations, such as the heterogeneous nature of present-day society, may provide a way of differently conceiving the history and social possibilities of Africa. Armed with this knowledge, Africans are now rewriting their history as newly de-colonised peoples. It has helped to restore the human dignity that European colonialism had taken away.

With the restoration of democratic rule in South Africa in 1994, the much abhorred institutionalised racism has come to end achieving in its wake the respect of the international community for the country in particular and for Africa in general.

De-colonising Writers: Nadine Gordimer and Anita Desai

Acknowledged in 1991 with a Nobel Prize for her forty-year opposition to apartheid and totalitarianism in politics and art, Gordimer is regarded in her home country, South Africa, as the conscience against apartheid.³⁸ On the world literary scene, she is seen as a writer who depicts the subtle

movements of conscience in troubled times. At the same time Gordimer has constantly argued that, for her, writing is a result of the tension between her “necessary gesture” (her voice as national novelist) and her “essential gesture” (her private voice). An intention that threads its way through this thesis is to investigate this artistic tension.

Interestingly, living in crisis and transformation in a post-independent India and identifying the artist as a person caught between insecure structures and values, Anita Desai acknowledges that art should deal with “enduring matters, less temporary and less temporal than politics.”³⁹ Nevertheless, she accepts that a novelist cannot altogether avoid history and politics. The choices are not simple; however, Desai’s defence that art does not “merely reflect reality... it enlarges it”⁴⁰ reveals the pressures of her role as a writer who belongs to history but who prefers to go beyond it. This should guarantee a continuing interest in her work for future generations.

CHAPTER 2

CLASHES AND COLLABORATIONS:

Cry the Peacock and The Lying Days

In continuing to connect themes of colonialism as clashes and collaborations, a governing idea is that writers work and function with the spirit of compromise, portraying areas of human experience that promote individual identity. In this respect Desai's *Cry the Peacock* makes an interesting comparison with Gordimer's *The Lying Days*. The novels are their first published works. In both issues of individual choice and responsibility are foregrounded. *The Lying Days* (1953) was written at the beginning of the era of institutionalised racism in South Africa when the country saw the rapid enactment of Apartheid legislation by the newly-elected National Party government. Written in 1963, *Cry the Peacock* reflects a fast changing socio-cultural situation in India characterised by rapid changes such as westernisation of the younger generation, a growing capital-oriented pattern of economy, and changing family and relationships. This world of crisis and confusion representative of the time is given special emphasis in the chapter as a way of appreciating Desai's and Gordimer's allegiance to individual freedom.

Desai: "plunging below the surface"

Desai is a writer who has been concerned with the psychological stresses, anxieties and suffering undergone by sensitive persons caught in a world of uncertain social and cultural values. It is commonly referred to as a "global state of interregnum" that reflects the international confusion of the early 1960s and late 1970s. Its specific counterpart identified in existentialism has

the writer caught in themes of anxiety, anguish and inner reality. Desai's first novel, *Cry the Peacock*, tackled existential themes with internal representations. It was hailed as trend-setting for its perceptive treatment of the psyche in poetic terms.¹ Since then, her ability to capture with precision the texture of the mind and to inscribe the atmosphere of its inner world have been widely recognised, even by those critics who accuse her of writing novels about moments of feeling rather than about matters of fact. Shiv K Kumar gave voice to this dissatisfaction when he said that Desai's writings are examples of lyrical exhibitionism done on too small a canvas, which did nothing to advance theme, plot and atmosphere.²

Yet such dismissals of this aspect of Desai's fiction have little effect on the widespread admiration among critics for the psychological and sociological content of her work. JG Masilamoni notes that Desai's fiction offers an important contribution to post-modernist representation of the hybrid nature of Indian identities,³ a position similar to Salman Rushdie's in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991). According to Rushdie, no author exposed to two or more cultures can be unquestionably content with one. He was referring to the sensibility of the 'migrants' – people "in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur" because of exposure to many cultures and literatures, and who must of necessity make a "new imaginative relationship with the world."⁴ The context of empire and migration provides the challenge and background for Indian writers to go beyond the crossroads and to diversify the old with new directions. Thus contemporary Indian writing is productively complex, with conventions surviving or being subordinated by innovative alternatives; foreign or marginal influences competing with or contributing to the mainstream. Desai's novels confront the plurality and complexities of modern Indian social life by establishing a contemporary discourse, which embraces cross-cultural pollinations in language and tradition. By dealing with matters of contemporary interest such as feminine sensibility, crises in family relationships, and reactions to urban violence, and by reconstructively

interrogating the Indian cultural voice, she joins those "second generation" novelists with a firm sense of national identity.

But what of the writer herself? Anita Desai was born in Mussori on 24 June 1937, the daughter of a Bengali father and a German mother. Hence it is not surprising that the diverse influences of East and West persist in her writing and in her exposition of human relationships. The family lived in Delhi where she had her early school education. She took her Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Delhi University in 1957, is married to Ashwin Desai, and has four children. She is also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She teaches in the writing programme at MIT, and divides her time between India, the USA, and England.

Desai's published works include a substantial body of fiction – a dozen novels and a collection of short stories, *Games at Twilight* - for which wide recognition has come to her. Recipient of the *Sahitya Akademi Award* in her own country, her work has been twice nominated for the British Booker Prize. As a speaker at conferences, a book reviewer, frequent contributor to literary journals, and a member of the Royal College of Letters, she has made an immense contribution to contemporary literary understanding. And with her novels widely translated, she now has a truly international audience.

Much of Desai's critical attraction stems from her uncommon ability to depict the intricate inner lives of individual characters engaged in the quest for order, knowledge and rootedness. She often does this by detailing the apparently commonplace, thus moving towards what Virginia Woolf in 'Modern Fiction' said she was doing, namely, recording "the atoms as they fall upon the mind".⁵ Like Woolf, Desai presents human meaning - reality Desai calls it - in subjective terms - and registers the yearning for fixity and

order. The dominant rhythms of the narrative are articulated in terms of human crisis: for example, in how to find a place of one's own when going against the general current. It is therefore unsurprising that Desai renders confusion and concern in poetic tones to create balance and proportion. Thus a prominent feature of her fiction, on which critics are unanimously agreed, is its verbal artistry ("imagist prose that acquires an ambiguous and terrible power")⁶ that reflects the personal vision of the writer and also both her strengths and limitations.

Desai's treatment of the psyche of the individual character in lyrical terms shows the ways in which public and private concerns intersect, and allows us an insight into the subjective origins of her own disaffection with the outer world. The extent of her disaffection has its roots in a combination of temperament and circumstance. In an interview, as early as 1959, at the start of her writing career, she hinted that she should be understood to be in

... a great need for secrecy and silence. What I wish to say is that writing is not an act of deliberation, reason or choice. It is a matter of instinct... and waiting. One must be alone, silent, in order to think or contemplate or write.⁷

This description of herself serves to focus not only Desai's reticent nature and her dissociation, say, from any specific political affiliation, but also to reveal how she perceives the hard facts of reality which, according to her, comprise the "one-tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean."⁸ She seizes on that incomplete mass of reality around her and tries "to discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depths, then illuminating those depths till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world."⁹ She unequivocally prefers the inner reality to the outer, insight to sight. Writing about the inner world frees her to rely on her intuition and individual vision. In addition, it answers some of the alleged problems posed by writing in English, the colonial and immigrant language, without roots and tradition

in India, "a plant that has never really taken root,"¹⁰ to use Desai's expression. Also, the cultural apparatus of British colonialism, especially the English language and English Literature, compels Indian anglophone writers to construct discourses, narratives, tropes and metaphors, to suit and make sense of their circumstances. This pressure is evident in every stage of her career.

Arguing from a materialist point of view, one might say that colonialism itself is not a tidy process. It begets, for example, ambivalence, which forces a rearticulation of culture and a reconfiguration of social priorities. Hence the 'compromise' that Desai arrives at in her choice of language, by giving up Bengali, her second language, and German, her mother tongue, and choosing to write her novels "in a language as rich, as flexible, supple, adaptable, varied and vital as English."¹¹ For her, "It is the language of instinct, of sense and sensibility. It is capable of prose and poetry. It answers my every need. I do believe it is capable of taking on an Indian character, an Indian flavour, purely by reflection."¹²

However, if the ecology of language is of no special concern to Desai, it is doubtful if the contradictions concerning language choice, mastery of forms and attitudes towards local colour are resolved in her writing. For, in contrast to writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and RK Narayan, who offer a body of texts engaged with the major dilemmas facing the Indian nation, Desai chooses to delineate the inner tensions and crises in the lives of individuals. As her work became increasingly focussed on the manifold psychic contours of character, critics said she was presenting a lopsided view of life with an excessive 'interior orchestration' of anguish. In an evaluation of her novels, Shyam Asnani amplifies this point and argues that those works classified as psychological show the unmistakable influence of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Proust.¹³ Their defining place in the Indian canon is something of a 'condition of England' novel that Indo-Anglian novelists deride.

In spite of such assessments Desai continued to write subjective novels not social documents. We might say with caution that her sensibility is private, that intuitive writing is a compelling passion for her, that the contemporary Indian setting lured her into the web of existential thinking, and that her experience has a less extended social range than other writers' who embody modernism. Yet it is also possible to find in her fiction documentation of the modern artist's dilemmas and resources, particularly those of post-independence Indo-English writers who are exposed to multiple traditions.

Desai's theory and practice, then, have the virtue of showing significant aspects of Indian-English writing, particularly the appropriation necessary for writers to get a leverage on the system within which they live. Describing a system caught between colonial and patriarchal structures, novelists such as Anita Desai, Khushwant Singh and Vikram Seth have acknowledged the mixed blessings of the colonial age. Though this process of appropriation by no means satisfies the quest for a "pure" portrayal of Indian reality of the kind that Anand and Rau exhorted the writers to aim at, it has resulted in an outpouring of texts that take new directions and their significance is an important component of the thesis. In these texts, while there is a display of the innovative Indian writing that shows a marked change from the Vedantic India of Rau to the village world of Upamnyu Chatterji and to the psychological realism in Desai, they also display a characteristic artistic tension resulting from writers having to become conscious of Indian multiplicity. This explains why a talented author like Desai deliberately chooses to write on topics of psychic and gender interest. It gives her the freedom to depend on her intuition and, as she says in "The Indian Writer's Problem", intuition is a key element in her writing process.¹⁴

Since the emphasis is on intuition, Desai thinks that patterns of life can be woven in any language, through the not so familiar pattern of a distant, introspective, analytical writing which she has called the "language of the interior".¹⁵ The poet and feminist critic Meena Alexander considers the interior voice (of a doubly colonised woman) as the second voice borne out of the "consciousness of the pain of colonialism" and out of "struggling with colonialism to reach out for a form that satisfies the established aesthetic... or a borrowed aesthetic."¹⁶ This second voice is powerful, and ferocious and for this female writer from a traditional, hierarchical colonial India it is an effort at decolonisation in which she has to come to terms with varieties of displacement. Surviving them is rewarding.

At any rate, intuition and interior voice combined to produce, in the opinion of Darshan Singh Maini, something remarkable, the psychological novel, at a time when Markandaya, Sahgel, Jhabvala and other women novelists were depicting an 'external world' - of partition, political upheavals, and social evils. As a housewife, and having selected family relationships as her domain of work, Desai attempts to evolve a method whereby a picture of the mind, so complex in itself, can be accepted. This method of work is not easy. As William James in *The Psychological Novel* describes it: "The attempt at introspective analysis is like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion".¹⁷ Or it is like, to use Desai's words, "the movement of the wing one tries to capture, not the bird".¹⁸ Thus, it is the image, the symbol, the myth, and the feat of associating, relating, and constructing with them that matters to her.

While it might seem that projecting "the facts of life" via artistic parallels is a literary achievement, Desai's early writing met severe censure. Critics considered it an 'evasion of responsibility', something like absconding from 'the real India' for the sake of artistic indulgence. But such criticism ignored the many moments of original intensity that surface in Desai's fiction. As she

said in reply to a questionnaire, the existence of a rhetorical element has given her “the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of novels”¹⁹ - proof of which are the dozen novels she has created.

This brings us to Desai's first novel, *Cry the Peacock* (1963), considered one of her most characteristic works and, in the opinion of Ram Chandra Rao, her best in psychological realism.²⁰ RS Sharma considers it “the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English” in India.²¹ For DS Maini, it is “a typically feminine novel”,²² while Srinivasa Iyengar considers it “the exploration of a particular kind of modern Indian sensibility, a sensibility obsessively concerned with existential problems.”²³ And for Desai it was “an effort to discover, underline and convey the significance of things” by delving “deeper and deeper in a character or a scene rather than going round about it.”²⁴

Some central features of *Cry the Peacock* (henceforth *CTP*) strike readers regardless of culture, politics and history. It is an overwhelmingly psychological novel with a sensitive heroine Maya who lives in the shadowy world of memories. She is 'overlorded' by a memory which has assumed the form of an ominous fixation: the memory of an albino astrologer's prediction of her or her husband's possible death four years after their marriage. The death of her pet Toto, in the first section, has queered the pitch and she has neurotic visions of her own dissolution and extinction which are further accentuated by marital discord amounting to total incompatibility. The growing tension reaches its climax when Maya kills her husband Gautama and commits suicide, in what has struck several critics as a moment of vulnerability of the protagonist-heroine living in confused and turbulent times.

Although the narrative takes Maya through social spaces marked by care and affection, it is the astrologer's prophecy of death that makes an indelible

imprint on her. Time and again, she ventures into her world of insanity – “silence and solitude”(127), “horrors and nightmares”(129) - where she hears only the hideous echoes of the albino's prophecy as peacocks cried in the forest:

And now I recalled that old-slick, sibilant tongue whispering poetry to me in the bat-tortured dark. 'Do you not hear the peacocks call in the wilds? Are they not blood-chilling, their shrieks of pain? "Pia, pia" they cry. "Lover, lover. Mio, mio, - I die, I die" (95).

Here Desai's inventiveness has fused elements of myth and psychology. From the start, it is perceivable that even as Maya unconsciously craves for an end to her neurotic fear of death, she shows a masochistic streak within her intense love for life; and during one moment of sanity an idea dawns on her that, since the albino has predicted death to either of them, it may be her husband Gautama, not she, whose life is threatened. She thus transfers her death-wish to Gautama and assumes that, as he is “detached” and “indifferent”, it will not matter for him if he loses his life.

Maya's death-world is intensely psychic in origin - her vision is heightened by dust storms, shrill mating cries of peacocks and visions of octopuses. Under the pressure of such self-imposed imaginings and terrestrial presentations, death is the natural relieving world of peace for her - “God let me sleep, forget, rest”(24)- which may be called, in her case, a liberating domain from psychic colonialism. As Maya struggles to free herself from such powerful subjugation, she inexorably encounters bizarre circumstances. Gautama, logical, theoretical and unsentimental, arouses feelings of alienation by asking her to visit the South alone. Other members of the household exclude her from business talk and family trips and in general isolate her. Emptied of all family connections, and left on her own, Maya systematically indulges in “visions of rats, lizards, snakes and iguanas creeping over her”(129), suggesting dissolution and extinction.

While this might be attributed to the mental depletion to which obsessive fear of death has led her, considered from a patriarchal viewpoint one might argue that the understated paradigmatic stance concerns the dangers of stifling female growth and individuality. Maya adequately describes the consequences of patriarchal cultural exploitation as “death in life and life in death”(95). Patriarchal domination manifests itself in all aspects of her personal and social life, such as in her marriage to a father-figure, acquiescence in the status quo and in her passiveness towards life. Patriarchy thus maintains the “death in life” by giving Maya an undesired life.

Whatever the absurd circumstances of Maya, they are now given a temporary respite with Gautama's death. In the final part of the story it is through the elfin spirit of a child in the ancestral house in Lucknow that Maya is presented to us. It is heartening to see her relieved of her “child-self”, but another possible side of the encounter with death is that “the darkness within could completely overwhelm and blot out the universe” (217). Ironically, with the death of her husband, she is no longer the person “intensely in love with living” (108) or someone with an incorporating vision of the universe and life as a result of the freedom she has obtained from neurotic tensions. She turns completely insane, and any further discussions of her would have to take into account the fact of this total madness and her moral confusion when she tries to struggle back into human civilisation.

If Desai's central characters, Maya in *Cry the Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City* or Mira Masi in *Clear Light of Day*, cultivate the violent but romantic idea that coming back to 'civilisation' is through tragedy - death in all three cases - then, as Sivaramakrishna, the existential critic, has observed, they traverse the ordeal of death while living.²⁵ This ordeal he describes as a movement, not always successful, from the initial phases of despair and alienation to the transcendence of these through the acceptance of death as

a kind of "inevitability, forcing one to conclude that it has some metaphysical and psychological significance."²⁶ Albert Camus, author of *The Fugitive*, *The Stranger* and *The Rebel*, shares the same view seeing it is a "passion which lifts the mind above the commonplace of a dispersed world from which it nevertheless detaches itself."²⁷ This would mean by implication a mode of knowledge and experience which would contain not only the fact of death but constant awareness of the dispersed fragmented nature of contemporary reality. In effect, it can be said, this is a quest for the unity of being that deflates the seeming triumph of death, which in the existential frame obtains 'moments of fulfilment'.

It is precisely this existential knowledge - the fact of death as the ultimate condition of the human being - with which Desai weaves patterns of life in much of her fiction. And it is imagistically announced in the very title of *Cry the Peacock*. The mating cries of the peacock bring to the protagonist Maya thoughts of her own death (98) and, associating herself with peacocks and their knowledge of death (95), she lives in the positive intuition of death as the ultimate reality. "The gentle moon of love ballads"(28) appears as "a demoniac creature"(28), a highly ornamented *Kathakali* dancer, "a phantom gone berserk"(28) and even as the graceful world, "only death and waiting"(22). In fact every facet and object in the universe marks for her pervasive emotions of loneliness, separation and death:

The stars surged towards us, their whole diamond weight descending upon us... Death lurked in those spaces, the darkness spoke of distance, separation, loneliness... And the longer I gazed, the farther they retreated, till there was only the darkness hanging, like a moist shroud over our heads, and the thought of the long journey: of the death from one's birth into another, the brave traversing of mute darkness, the blind search for another realm of lucidity in the midst of chaos (22).

Two important points emerge from this passage. First, Maya's state of mind and the revelation of what psychic disturbances can do to a person. The

ugliness of death in her imagination is the moist shroud over heads, a journey from one's birth into another (20-23). Indeed, Maya's emphasis on death suggests that, for her and for Nirode in *Voices in the City*, and for Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*, "death is the true element in which life survives,"²⁸ as though death is the sustaining force on which life should depend. The impulse to generalise and universalise this particular phenomenon, moreover, points towards the moralising impulse of the fiction: an impulse which constructs the 'reality' about things which daily routines obscure.²⁹

Second, we should consider *CTP* as a deeply significant 'colonial discourse' appealing to the writers of post-independent India of the Sixties when Desai wrote it. Although Desai's existential mode of thinking transcends the usual modalities of Indo-Anglian fiction, such as the tradition-modernity theme of Mulk Raj, or the rural-urban dichotomy of Arun Joshi, it arguably also refers to the continuation of the colonial world in the newly-independent India hollowed out from its traditional ideologies of contentment in living and hope in life.

To illustrate this point one may turn again to the images of death and disintegration with which the novel begins. The death of Maya's dog, Toto, is symbolic of the sorrow of existence. Her life with Gautama is "always silence and waiting"(25). The remembered joys of her happy childhood in her father's house, which are now overtaken by thoughts of death, underscore the disintegration of a house devoid of the fun and laughter that bring order and meaning in life.

The narrative thus subtly explores as a parallel theme the fragmentation of Maya's home that seems to make a point about the colonial erosion of cultural values; an erosion that threatens to unmoor the values of an independent society. Maya is agonizingly aware of this:

God, now I am in the net of the inescapable, and where lay the possibility of mercy, of release? This net was no hallucination no.... Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? Am I in need of one? But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore - only death and waiting (97).

We see here how the malaise of contemporary life, incapable of providing a meaningful frame of reference for the creative mind, forcing it instead to look for other alternatives. Independence had not given the shelter and life it promised. Feeble, infirm and in despair, though with a stern will bearing the strength of 'otherness', Maya listens to the voice within her and owns up to the powerlessness that comes with being a colonised woman - "only death and waiting."

And if it is in part her femininity that we see here, there is another part of her, the other voice of self, which has the moral courage to spell out violation, humiliation and marital bondage through the latent ferocity that lies in the hearts of women. This takes a deeper meaning and significance in *CTP* when Maya's awareness of "only death and waiting" is juxtaposed with the " (in) love with life" that is suggested explicitly through the symbolism of the peacock. For Maya:

Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death and know them to be one. Living they are aware of death. Dying they are in love with life (95).

What does all this mean? Is it a longing for escape we see here or a woman's consciousness pitched to despair? Or is it a true and final vindication of the idea that death can bring more attachment to life and therefore is something to look forward to? The answer to these questions lies in the importance given to death in the novel. The title, the place and the protagonist, even femaleness itself, are wrapped in the binding clothes

of death. Theoretically the novel seeks to impress on both character and reader an acute awareness of human limitation; but it also generates, tragically, knowledge of the marginality of woman's experience and the hostile powers of colonialism lurking in the background.

Accepting the predicament of women writers confronting the strictures of an unjust society, Desai offers the authoritative presence of the motif of death and its associative ideas in the imagery of peacock. This gives the text its eclectic nature, which is one of the book's merits. In fact, imagery is stretched to the limit in both the title of the novel and in the name of the protagonist who is appropriately named after that most elusive of Indian perceptions of the nature of reality – Maya. "The net of the inescapable" – death itself - is no illusion, but just another sense in which the term *maya* can be used. Maya can be, speaking *Vedantically* (philosophically) *Mahamaya*, the primordium, the matrix of all that was, is, and will be; the pure, the immaculate, the unborn, the unattainable, the inexplicable. A fuller examination of the subtly complex element of *illusion*, which has provided a firm grounding for Maya and her creator, will extend our grasp of the pressures out which the work may have grown. Critics recognise this quality of the inexplicable even in the peacock used in the novel's title with its numerous symbolic undertones: death in life, life in death, death as a liberator. They call it "a constitutive symbol", one whose meaning is never fully exhausted. Nor does the novel attempt to iron out some of the ambivalences thus created.

Questions surrounding the novel's complexities are in part the novel's concerns too. These concerns are transmuted through a structural absorption, which takes its ultimate form in the powerful presentation of Maya's inner life. However, her mental life emerges in the lyrical intricacy of the text not as a sign of despair but as affirmation and self-fulfilment. In many instances it is a form of oppositional discourse: a psychological

reaction to salvage individual worth from oppressive socio-psychological determinants. In other words, instead of sentimentalism the writing in its unfolding of a state of mind in all its complexities reminds us of a freer, more personally attuned rhythm that can hold our interest in the years to come.

That Desai's fiction can 'plumb the depths' of her protagonists' consciousness and offer them a life to live in their own sensibilities, obsessions and psychic dilemmas is one reason why her novels are labelled as 'purely subjective'. In that sense *CTP* is a convincing portrait of a single psychology that reminds us of the author's affinity with psychological realism. But, by treating patriarchal (and colonial) relations within the family unit, Desai demonstrates a keen knowledge of the problems of her society in general and of women in particular. Her vision as a writer stresses that awareness and taking responsibility for issues are the blueprint for exploding its contradictions. The next chapter investigates issues pertinent to colonial modernity in order to discover more socially responsible protagonists.

Gordimer: "a romantic struggling with reality"

Because the tide of idealism and political fervour that enthused Indian writers in the pre-independence period ebbed in the Fifties because of post-colonial degeneration, Indian writers like Anand and Desai, indignant at this disintegration wrote about social abuses or turned to portraying the tragedy of human souls. Suffused with this spirit, they gave voice to the alienated, frustrated and 'unliberated' individual who felt 'killed somewhere within themselves'. India is free from British colonialism, but far from free from the sordid and suffocating conditions that colonised it.

South Africa's colonial experience was slightly different. For, unlike other countries where the British, the French and other European countries ruled

the indigenous people and on withdrawing left the country in indigenous hands, South Africa passed from colonisation from without - Dutch and English - to perpetuated colonisation from within, in the form of white minority power over the black majority. In the words of Nadine Gordimer, it was a "double colonisation"³⁰ - from which the country finally emerged in 1994 with the historical event of a democratic election.

The event in all respects had the capacity to unburden the past. It was a great spectacle of human liberation and marked the "grand finale of the age of colonisation,"³¹ to quote Nadine Gordimer's *Writing and Being* (1995). For Gordimer, and for many others, the election was a substantive step towards dismantling *apartheid*, which had been described as the "all consuming single internal issue at the core of the country's psychic and intellectual life" since 1948 when the Nationalists came to power and introduced racial division.³² It also reminded us of the philosophical and moral problems apartheid threw up on a daily basis, inevitably drawing writers of conscience into an increasing focus on an anti-apartheid polemic in their works and giving rise to what Tony Morphet has called a "solidarity constitution" in the literature of the time.³³ Morphet's terms indicate the degree to which the racial question had come to limit the role of South African writers to simply recording the texture of the society in a specific situation with strong reverberations of 'protest' and 'commitment'.

Gordimer, however, as commentators observe, steers a mid-way course between the literatures of protest and non-involvement by integrating public themes into private visions, although she has stated, "all that is and has been written by South Africans [including her own work] is profoundly influenced by the politics of race."³⁴ But her position as one of the founding members of the 'culture' conscience group was not a simple one. Being a white South African, she had to deal with the problem of audience, especially when the international reputation of her work derived not only

from its literary values but also from the enormous amount of information she was able to offer outsiders about the conditions of life in her country. However fresh and informative her depictions appeared to outsiders, her internal readership found them "stale, clichéd and prescriptive." Gordimer was aware of this, and, as a way of defending herself, remarked in 1960 that the task of a South African writer was to provide a background of self-knowledge. One may add that colonialism and apartheid frustrated the accomplishment of even this limited aim.

The identity of white South Africans is also of audience significance. It is based on an assumption that they have European cultural and literary affiliations. As a result, there are many critics who place Gordimer's work in some category of the European novel of the Empire because of her compromised position of segregated privilege in a white settler state, despite her assertion of alignment with the forces of change. Lewis Nkosi has remarked that Gordimer and others of her generation "were never classified under the rubric of the 'new'(post-colonial literature)...their subject may have been considered somewhat 'exotic', but no one thought of them as anything but continuers of a metropolitan tradition of English literature."³⁵ There is truth in this for, first, her position as a white South African problematises her status as a post-colonial writer, and, second, several South African writers felt that the narrative realism of Gordimer's novels fell within the colonial boundaries of fiction rather than within the boundaries of the more radical technical experiments in English literature. Given the multitude of problems created by a colonial heritage and a racially torn land, her fiction, in effect, is said to have fallen between gaps in contemporary writing.

Apart from stultifying encounters with her audience and the conditions of 'double colonialism', Gordimer is also enmeshed in typically colonial dilemmas: her white settler origin in a colonial society, her tensions between the conflicting claims of liberalism and radicalism, her struggles to discover

and construct an *African* identity for herself, escape and involvement, passivity and activism. All these “pervade and infuse every aspect of the fiction and contribute a subtext of ambiguity and contradiction, which runs below the surface of all of the novels.”³⁶ This view, though at one level it implies the tensions that stem from South Africa’s insular situation, at another level focuses on the contradictions apparent in the liberal position that Gordimer’s colonial upbringing imposed on her.

Thrown into this vortex of tensions and ambiguities, Gordimer was tempted to romanticise and generalise in her fiction. She has explained the interconnectedness of these twin impulses when, in 1965, she called herself “a romantic struggling with reality”.³⁷ This may imply that her personal view of literature is based on an awareness of a romantic idealism which looks on literature as a redemptive medium that can provide a fruitful avenue for critical discussion of social ills. It also suggests those ‘subjective continuities of response’ which so firmly knit her novels into a coherent whole and shape their themes, attitudes and perspectives in ways which allow the intrusion of a personal vision which underlies her political and social stance. Leaning on the vision that a new society can emerge, her characters are injured and insulted, but always endure and delight and perceive a future with hope.

Christopher Heywood in a survey of Gordimer’s novels notes: her work is “an amalgam of the urbane European and the American literary heritage”.³⁸ The statement is a pointer to not only the legacy of a colonial ideology which permeated white South African society in the era of industrialisation but also to the period in the early 1960s when white writers wrote in a literary vacuum that black writers had yet to fill. Making the best of such a situation, in her early novels Gordimer re-explores the themes traced by such writers as Peter Abrahams and Wole Soyinka: the inescapable commitment to the problems posed by the past. “From the start, then, modern African literature has been essentially a committed literature” Gordimer wrote in her critical

essay *The Black Interpreters* in 1973. Her short stories and early novels reflect this commitment. She expressed a similar sentiment in a muted form in 1991, which sheds light on the thematic essence of her entire work:

I think people are torn by the different pressures put on them in their lives. I would say, almost never, that the personal doesn't give up without a tremendous struggle.³⁹

That struggle, where, for example, one must choose between happiness and freedom, is overtly represented by Tom in *Occasion for Living*, who is "an unbeliever in the midst of a fanatical cult"(285). Although Tom's words reveal the incurable dilemmas in the life of a colonial product, Gordimer's fictional output, when seen in its entirety shows the maintenance of a delicate balance between concern and ambivalence. As she writes in *A Guest of Honour*, "One could never hope to be free of doubt, of contradiction within... this was the state in which one lived... and no act could be free of it"(487). Yet the quotation explains more than the constraints of doubt and contradiction in the personal life of a writer. It confirms the invasive effect of environment - institutionalised racism - which in turn narrowed the range of a writer's vision so that the basic concerns of many novelists, including Gordimer, were the issues associated with colonialism and 'the politics of race'.

Unsurprisingly three of her books were banned in South Africa on political grounds. Despite repressive censorship measures, however, Gordimer continued to reside in South Africa, while other writers of her time, black and white, were killed, exiled, or, to escape apartheid's oppression, preferred expatriation.

When Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1991, it was an international recognition of her achievements as a novelist, critic and short story writer. Her work has been enthusiastically welcomed by an

international readership anxious to learn more about South Africa's apartheid past. For the international community Gordimer is the interpreter of 'South Africa's conscience', given her life-long opposition to white supremacy and the fact that very little imaginative fiction emanated from 'white South Africa' during these years. Some reasons for this sparseness have already been stated. Now, however, it is important to look at Gordimer's achievement in surviving and finally prospering within the limitations inherent in the position of the 'colonial' writer. The content of this section of the chapter falls within this purview.

Born in 1923, Gordimer grew up in the town of Springs in the Johannesburg area of the Transvaal. She received her early education in a convent school and graduated from the University of Witwatersrand. She first wrote for the children's supplement of the *Star* and by 1923 her stories began to appear in the small liberal magazines *Forum*, *South African Opinion*, and *Trek*. These 'master-servant stories', as Gordimer calls them, were her first attempt to treat in fiction the distortions in personal relationships caused by a system that imposed racial segregation. Though limited in focus these stories are not lacking in force. They are often seen as reference points by which to measure the remarkable changes evident in her writing during the following fifty years. If there is anything to be stressed here it is that Gordimer's literary growth cannot be seen as pre-determined; it features a continuous transformation which, according to her, is "part of the *transformation of my place* in order for it to know me."⁴⁰

Viewed from this characteristically South African perspective, it is no surprise to come across statements that imply that if Gordimer had not been born in South Africa, she might have been a very different kind of writer. An examination of her work reveals her early stages of unsettlement as she strove to find a voice of her own, moving from the psychological focus in her short stories to the landscape painting of the country and the critique of

racism in her novels. Here was a writer whose mind was in a state of struggle and rapid transformation, exploring in a personal way her own world and literary capacities. Indeed, Gordimer's first novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), "like the *bildungsromane* written by George Eliot and DH Lawrence to which the text is closely related",⁴¹ narrates a personal exploration that (in a colonial context) attempts to find an authentic 'voice'. It chronicles the moment in which, as Clingman puts it, "a deeper historical consciousness is both discovered by Gordimer and then discarded."⁴² It dramatises the problems that haunt the writer outside the orbit of a metropolitan culture. It hints at, to quote Gordimer herself, "the stockade thrown upon your mind by the [South African] situation," and the failure of the novelist to become aware of "the underlying patterns and structures beneath the stockade."⁴³ Having remarked how Gordimer had to strengthen herself to retain her identity and resist the pressures of colonialism, this, then, would be a good place to start our discussions of *The Lying Days*.

The fundamental concerns of *The Lying Days* (henceforth *TLD*) lie in its position as an apprentice impressionistic novel in which Gordimer experiments with the problems of the colonial writer living in South Africa who first comes under the influence of the colonial society which formed her personality and who later attempts to move outside its circumscribed boundaries. Dominic Head in his interpretation of *TLD* identifies the tripartite structure of the novel – "The Mine", "The Sea", "The City" – as paralleling the process of *Bildung* in which space offers an enlargement of the micropolitics of the body; the protagonist Helen Shaw's growing into maturity at a physical and emotional level in the spaces she inhabits.⁴⁴ With her insights guided by the authorial voice (the autobiographical element is markedly present) Helen supports such an interpretation when she says: "It was not enough to create the existence of the Mine, to make it possible at the other end of a space of which *this* was at one end"(54). The mine

shapes the psychology of Helen's life in which the 'colonial mentality' defines her growth to womanhood.

However, she rebels against the confines of the small-town mentality, and on entering university joins Johannesburg's liberal bohemian culture. She meets Paul Clark who works as a welfare officer for the Department of Native Affairs. Their love affair is fuelled by a certain idealism but, paradoxically, it falters when it becomes apparent that idealism – opposition to apartheid - cannot connect in any practical way with the harsh pragmatics of the times. This leads to tension between Helen and Paul. Helen leaves for Europe deciding to return to South Africa when the situation changes.

"The Mine" introduces Helen and the mining (colonial) life that influences Helen's personality. To the Shaws and other members of white society here, *that other world that was the world* was England, which they attempted to re-create in the African veld. Helen's mother dresses in 'the Mine style', the flower-patterned blues and pinks of British royalty, and the Shaws save all their lives to afford one trip 'home' to England on retirement. When Helen introduces to her parents Paul Clark, whom she is considering marrying, what impressed them "was that Paul's father was a Justice of the Peace and that 'Natal' was in itself a guarantee of pure English blood and allegiance to England, the distinction of an eternal colonialism they desired above all else" (223).

A refusal to grow out of the surviving remnants of colonialism is one of the features of mine life. Social decorum and status-keeping are other features and both qualities are captured in the incident of the strike (35-38) when African miners objecting to bad food gather around the Mine Manager's house one Sunday morning. The whites express curiosity at the unusual assertiveness of the blacks, but greater concern is shown for serving tea and scones to hastily gathered mine officials, with apologies for the

circumstances of the affair and blame for the flies on 'them' outside because they (the miners) always bring flies, even to a strike. In the end the crisis is resolved without fuss and the 'boys' agree to return to the compound, while the Compound Manager trowels on the paternalistic pieties of the mine world by deciding not to reduce the 'kaffir beer' ration despite the fact that, as young Helen puts it, the miners had behaved "very badly". As a child, Helen views this incident with gentle satire, intensified by juxtaposition with the 'benevolence' of the Mine Manager who works on the docility of the mine workers. We begin to know the girl - what she will love and what she will reject, what she will accept and what she will scorn, what drives her from her home and what finally brings her back to her parents.

She begins to see the society of the mine as a veneer, which prohibits the expression of emotion and spontaneous feeling. Like other mine officials, Helen's father "never touched the real working life of the Mine that went on underground"(142). The preoccupation with superficial appearance causes Helen to notice "how we were presented to visitors in our own home... like actors placed in a stage-set"(161). Gordimer uses Helen's excessive concern with the surface of her world as a vehicle for presenting the colonial setting and for accentuating the ways South Africans are separated, made "strangers", to use Gordimer's well-known metaphor, by viewing the barriers between groups physically. Moreover, this is also one of the means by which Helen is characterised. She recognises that her parents are involved in the meaningless and impossible task of creating a 'fairylane' world in an environment that bears scant relationship to the ugly 'real' world of the veld that prompts her rebellion. Having rejected the world of 'surface signs' her parents had set before her, and with nothing else to lean on, she embraces the world of imaginative life. Initially her reveries are vague and are associated with the south seacoast. She thinks of the sea as she allows her fingers to run against the enclosing mine fence:

I walked closer to the level line of fences, trailing the fingers of my left hand lightly across the corrugations so that they rose and fell in the arpeggio of movement. I thought of water. Of the sea - the surprise, the lift of remembering that there was the sea ... the sea which did something the same to your fingers, threading water through them... like the pages of a thick book falling away rapidly rippling back beneath your fingers to solidity. The sea could be smelled for a moment, a terrible whiff of longing evaporated with the deeper snatch of breath that tried to seize it (189).

The sensuousness of the prose, the unrestrained associative thought, and the emphasis on the senses of sound, touch and smell, clearly place the sea in a different world from that of Helen's parents' house where everything is covered, neatly arranged and lifeless. "The Mine" concludes with a reverie in which Gordimer attempts to capture both Helen's feeling of security within the mine world and her nascent thoughts about moving outside the boundaries of that world. Helen desperately wants change, for which she is willing to discard the stereotyped world of the mine and to substitute it with the empirical knowledge that her parents and apartheid deny her.

In "The Sea," Helen, rebelling against the spirit of the Mine, moves outside the boundaries of the mining world through sexual experience and contact with members of other racial groups. Her initial perception of race as 'a fact of nature' changes to the possibility of breaking the myth for the sake of human relationships. In doing so there is for the individual something like a rebirth - a birth into a "second consciousness", even if the individual involved has to encounter difficulties. When Helen tries to break out of her ideological and historical confinements by befriending Mary Seswayo, a black co-student at the university, she ends in failure, for she is unable to relate to her as a person. The closest that Helen can come to Mary is through a paternalistic attitude (111, 145, 182), a state of mind which attempts to transform her view of blacks. She realises that she must accept the barriers of apartheid and that her naive idealism must make way for an

understanding of her imprisonment by a system she is learning to reject. This particular difficulty of solving problems concerning inter-racial relationships is, therefore, left unresolved in *TLD* and, though it is taken up again in *A World of Strangers* (1958), it is in *My Son's Story* (1991) that Gordimer finally moves out from the treatment of marginalisation and despair to warm human relationships, vitality and colour.

Helen's friendship with the Jew, Joel Aaron, looks into the question of 'rebirth' and gives her unclear answers from the realms of faith and race. In fact she learns through this friendship how deeply entrenched in her own psychic life are the prejudices surrounding race. Thus, the Joel-Helen affair, though more successfully integrated into the novel and remains as a running thread to the end, is in a submerged form because Helen is a white Christian and Joel is a Jew. The answer to her question to Joel at the end of the novel – "Do you think it might have been because you are a Jew and I am a Gentile?" (356) - is a discovery that she makes about what has stunted her relationship with Joel. For Helen the taboo of "the difference in nationality" is experienced as "very old, very deep, very senseless"(360). Its effect is self-withdrawal, a form of self-imprisonment, which Helen calls on another occasion "the corrosive guilt"(211) that plagues her conscience so that when finally when Joel makes it clear that he had loved her all along, she weeps. She says:

[I] felt for a moment that my whole consciousness, resting since I was born, on one side, had suddenly turned over, like a great stone on the bed of the sea, and shown an unknown world, a shining unseen surface, different, different utterly, alive with waving weeds and startled creatures pulsating on the coral(337).

The passage pulsates with Helen's initiation into the art of self-discovery and truth. She realises, after the departure of Joel's ship, that "perhaps I had always loved him, always wanted him, and merely made to do with others"(333), inscribing a South African cultural situation with the notion that

it is better to think of Joel as a friend, not as a lover. Clearly, this is childish thinking; but to escape the complications of an interracial relationship is paradoxically to accept it in all its harsh reality; this is the lesson of experience that Helen learns through the affair with Joel. The sea, previously a vague image, is made sufficiently clear. The sea is life, fecundity, and beauty; and standing beside it, Helen, who previously thought of leaving for Europe, feels more than ever connected to South Africa. In a later passage, still at the beach, she defines the "real, personal realm in which life is lived"(330):

I was twenty-four and my hands were trembling with the strong satisfaction of having accepted disillusion as a beginning rather than an end: the last and most enduring illusion: the phoenix illusion that makes life always possible (367).

The words indicate a farewell to innocence and youth, and a self-declaration of independence from the tyranny of both a constricting space and a tendency to idealism. She begins to feel that disillusionment and sadness can be the beginnings of a new life. The novel's ultimate *satisfaction* lies in Helen's acceptance of this eternal contradiction, apparently projected from her romantic struggling with the realities of life. Gordimer, too, attempts to convince us, in the words of the epigraph, that Helen has progressed "through all the lying days" of her youth and is seen here to "wither into truth". Adopting the role of the mature woman, full of accumulated wisdom from raw experience, Helen looks at her future as one of unceasing advance. The little restraint between illusion and disillusion, realism and idealism, that she imposes on herself should be regarded as an achievement for her and for Gordimer her creator. In this respect the novel is typically humanist-modernist, not only tolerating contradiction, but also actively celebrating it.

However, if 'acceptance' is a governing principle of life, as *TLD* appears to suggest, then the novel falls in with the governing terms of an apartheid

environment whose social reality presumably must also be "accepted". Helen and Joel have come virtually to 'accept' what is said in the last page of the novel (336), which Helen calls "the unreasoning ties of the blood" and the fact that Joel as a Jew and Helen as a white Christian has obstructed their relationship. In so far as an investigation of colonialism includes an exploration of the black and white polarity, an 'acceptance' of "the unreasoning ties of blood" may sound accommodating. But from a typically liberal and humanist angle, this mould of thinking looks "distinctly ominous".

Seen within the context of a fairly conventional South African *bildungsromane*, Helen's statement might be regarded as an instance of confusion. But as we follow her journey from one stage of mature consciousness to the next, she transforms from being into knowing and the novel itself becomes a conglomeration of wisdom drawing from the South African environment answers to questions about South African identity. Within the essentially unchanging framework of apartheid and the constricted focus of *TLD*, it is a white identity, white consciousness, and a white world that the novel attempts to make visible. Blacks enter into this world as intruders and strangers. Composed three years after the 1948 Election, this novel gives a strange feeling of exclusion - a feeling that characterised the South African experience for many years.

Ideologically it is a liberal and humanist novel in which Gordimer displays her liberal consciousness. Yet, for Gordimer, ideology doesn't end with finding her 'voice' and her sense of 'place' in the literary realm. That would be too limited a vision for a writer who vows to be born again and again to experience the reality of freedom. What this means is that, with increasing force and imaginative rendering, Gordimer is determined to find a New World away from *A World of Strangers* and whose hallmarks will reflect not only a non-racial community, but also, perhaps, more significantly, a society where the individual will be free from the stranglehold of an imprisoned

conscience. The next chapter will analyse Gordimer's protagonists' struggle to escape from the dark corridors of the "prison house of colonialism" and move perhaps towards an end of "the lying days".

CHAPTER 3

COLONIAL MODERNISM: THE CHANGING FACE OF GORDIMER'S AND DESAI'S LATER FICTION

This chapter places Gordimer's and Desai's later fiction in the context of its time and beyond, thus considering them as writers who probe old preoccupations in new ways. The chapter emphasizes throughout the energy and freshness engendered by the texts and their subjects; it will simultaneously point to uniqueness and continuity, as writers engage with contemporary debates. An attempt is made to free Gordimer from a liberal/radical divide, while an accent on Desai as a social witness is meant to reveal her participation in modernism.

The term "colonial modernism" can be applied to both Gordimer and Desai. RK Srivastava in his critical work *Perspectives on Anita Desai* (1984) thus describes her writing.¹ Some of his essays ("Anita Desai's Modernist Novels", "A Journey to the Self in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*", "A Vindication of the Feminine" in *Cry the Peacock*) usefully demonstrate Desai's forte as a critical modern enquirer. Similarly Gordimer's ability to recognise a contemporary problem and pursue it fearlessly gives her a special place in modern writing.

Both Gordimer and Desai are acclaimed modernist writers well versed in the theory and practice of the novel and particularly able to formulate their own views on it. Desai has written that the purpose of her writing is to "bring order to disorder, by reflecting the anomalies and dilemmas of the unexampled *and unexamined* territories of life" (emphasis added) in the contemporary world.² Reacting to the banning of *Burger's Daughter*, Gordimer wrote that her writing is about the "human conflict between the

desire to live a personal, private life, and the rival claim of social responsibility to one's fellow men."³

It is this incorporating of social commitment with personal freedom, despite challenging historical situations, that gives the phrase colonial modernism its relevance. It points to much that is admirable in Gordimer's and Desai's work: their contemporariness and yet their tendency to rise above contemporaries; their openness to new directions and willingness to see multifarious points of view however diverse; and the ironic subversion they adopt which always protects them from over-simplification. It also denotes the humane quality of their writing for they both seem to be making a place both for their readers and their characters in which the human spirit can expand freely.

Perhaps these qualities can best be illustrated by looking at their fiction from the 1970s to the 1990s. Particular attention is given to those novels in which history is imaginatively combined with plot to deal with dislocation and with the odysseys the characters undertake in order to handle questions of exile and return. This can especially be seen in Gordimer's work. As suggested in the previous chapters, she has moved from an insistence on a writer's necessary right to create novels of social awareness to a reluctant acceptance of politically self-conscious novels that engage with South Africa's manifold dislocations.

It is a fair generalisation that during the twentieth century most white South African writers fell into two categories: those who left the country and examined South Africa from self-imposed or voluntary exile and those who chose to live in South Africa with its privileges but also with its daily enforced participation in a system they felt powerless to change. Gordimer chose the second course and decided to remain in South Africa, and thus belonged to the privileged section of the community. At the same time she made no secret of her opposition to apartheid, and was outspoken in her

condemnation of it. She was critical, too, of censorship, which in her view had a disastrous effect on the natural development of South African literature.⁴

However, her novels were not used as vehicles for protest; they were rational examinations of a society she knew well. And censorship never adversely affected her, in that her work was not published in South Africa. This balance between her political opinions and her literary life is similar to the balance reflected in the novels themselves. On the whole her characters accept the limitations imposed by their conditions. Possibilities exist – but how does one explore them? “There are possibilities for me”, reflects Liz in *The Late Bourgeois World*, “but under what stone do they lie?” (90). The fullest examination of this problem of what to do, and how to act, and, most important, how to accommodate oneself to a changing world, occurs in *July’s People* and *My Son’s Story*. The characters discover that possibilities lie under the stone, but that in accepting the challenge to act they have to revise their concept of honourable conduct for a better and meaningful life. It is in her imaginative illustration of this theme that Gordimer achieves the finest balance in rendering this idea of colonial modernity, though as King, Cooke and Lomborg note, a tendency to ambiguity is an implicit feature in that attempt.⁵

Gordimer began writing while she was a schoolgirl. Her short stories and novels reflect quite simply the life of the people among whom she grew up. Her first novel, *TLD* (1953) presents us with the story of a young woman’s gradual awakening to maturity, set in the period immediately before and after 1948, when South Africa was beginning to move towards a dominating Afrikaner nationalism.⁶ Helen’s striving to free herself (in *TLD*) from a cloying middle class conventional life is ironically paralleled by the general movement in South African society towards restriction, and her unsatisfactory relationship with any of the men she meets is linked with the gulf which divides white from black in the social structure. “Even in the midst

of a brutal reality, I was not involved, I remained lost" (328), "I felt myself among strangers" (186). These are the ways she sees herself. Belonging neither to the white ruling class nor to the black majority, Helen Shaw decides to go to Britain with the promise of returning to South Africa when the internal contradictions are resolved.

Her discovery of being a stranger reaches forward to the title of the second novel. *A World of Strangers* (1958) is a splendid recreation of the two separate worlds of Johannesburg in the 1950s, but it leaves unanswered questions about the mechanics of political change.⁷ However, the decision at the end of the novel of the liberal-minded Londoner, Toby Hood, to remain as the firm's representative in South Africa, and to become involved in the realities of the country, echoes the aspiration towards commitment which ended *The Lying Days*. Where the lack of internal exploration is disquieting in the first novel, *A World of Strangers* is "primarily diagnostic, contesting metropolitan values", where Gordimer writes almost like a Johannesburg Jane Austen but "on the wider and more dangerous pastures of the sociological novel."⁸

In her *Occasion for Loving* (1963) Gordimer takes a dangerous step to suggest a political and aesthetic remedy, at a sociological level, for the ills of the society she has accepted to remain in.⁹ Here sexual and racial themes conjoin successfully through her satirising personal prejudices in the sub-textual psycho-analysis of the novel. The plot conveys the progress of an affair between Gideon, a black painter, and Ann, a visitor from England. They meet in the home of Jessie Stillwell, who has great faith in personal relationships, and has always tried to do the decent thing, especially to behave well to a black man. Jessie sees the relationship of Gideon and Ann building in the normal way, but soon notices a change in their relationship. Ann, who had been 'colour blind', gradually begins to see Gideon's blackness. Because she can no longer really see him as a man but, instead, thinks of him as her 'black' lover, Gideon can no longer ignore her

whiteness. When she leaves South Africa, talking vaguely about a meeting in Europe, he feels justified in regarding the end of the affair with bitterness: "It is the white world which has betrayed him, as it has denied him all his life, by depriving him of a status in society, by denying him a passport, by forcing him to remain in the bond of his skin".¹⁰ In such a context of institutional repression there can be no occasion for loving between black and white. Stillwell, like Gordimer, confronting the inefficacy of a humanistic creed in an unequal society, comments:

They believed in the integrity of personal relations against the distortions of law and society. What stronger and more proudly personal bond was there than love? Yet even between lovers they had seen blackness count, the personal return inevitably to the social, the private to the political... So long as the law remained unchanged, nothing could bring integrity to personal relationships (279).

The next three novels, *The Late Bourgeois World* (1967), *A Guest of Honour* (1970) and *Burger's Daughter* (1979), examine what is basically the same problem – how one lives in a society whose values are different from one's own. But the difference in treatment is immense. *The Late Bourgeois World* is a short novel, hardly more than a long story, and it deals with a single day in the life of the narrator, Liz van Den Sandt. It is the day on which she receives news of her ex-husband's suicide, and also the day on which she is invited to make a political gesture possible for someone in her position: direct her husband's bank account towards assisting a banned political association. Although she knows that the risk would be small, lying awake that night, meditating on the events of the day, she hears the clock ticking out the meaning of her life, "afraid, alive, afraid alive..."(160). Through her thoughts and memories she comes to appreciate that her husband Max, for all his limitations, had been right and that "you can't do more than give what you have" (160), however inadequate such a contribution may be. During the evening of this day Liz arranges the importation of foreign funds, and the ending of the novel implies that she will agree to become involved, thus risking her liberty. Gordimer, by chronicling the unsuccessful activities of a

white revolutionary, as Judie Newman suggests, recognises the need to move beyond a bourgeois world, which has become a living death {"dead white" (103)}, to something that suggests growth,¹¹ like the astronauts who fly to the moon in order "to transcend all kinds of human limits"(154). This is an indication of the reawakening of Liz's deadened emotions, and anticipates the central concerns of the novels that follow.

The novel that followed four years later, *A Guest of Honour* (1970), is set in an unnamed newly-independent African country that bears some resemblance to Zambia. Gordimer had seriously thought of moving there after the Sharpeville incident (1960), only to discover that she would not be accepted. As she put it, "Whatever happens at home, whatever feelings arise, in a strange way one is accepted as a white African. It is the only real identity I have."¹²

The action of *The Guest of Honour* spans the crucial year following the granting of independence, a year filled with the problems and tensions that have confronted most independent African states. Thus we are shown the insidious growth of revolution, neo-colonialism, labour unrest, strikes which erupt into bloody riots, fierce political rivalry and tribal in-fighting. Still, according to some social critics, the novel is "a sophisticated political analysis"¹³ and "a wonderfully intelligent rendering of political theories and ideologies, revealing in every page Gordimer's [recent] immersion in Nkrumah, Cabral, Nyerere and Fanon".¹⁴ Woven into this political ambience is the figure of James Bray, the 'guest of honour' at the independence celebrations, and later 'special education adviser' to the newly-independent state. Formerly, Bray, a colonial servant, had helped to launch the independence movement, and later helps the country to move in an enlightened and progressive direction. Later, he watches the country falling into political expediency and then into a brutal form of neo-fascism. Caught between various complexities of political independence, Bray finds himself

open to a new set of challenges in which he sees that his aim, the extension of human freedom, can only be achieved through blemished means:

The means, as always, would be dubious. He had no others to offer with any hope of achieving the end, and as he accepted the necessity of the end, he had no choice (465).

Freedom, as Bray discovered, lies in the recognition of necessity, in the acknowledgement that he must respond as best he can. What the novel shows, finally, is that it is the ability and willingness to respond that is important. As Bray has always known, "one was available wherever one was of use. What else was there to live by?" (498) Bray does not know where that conviction will lead him, but this point serves as a fitting conclusion to *A Guest of Honour* and as a reminder of Gordimer's multi-perspective novel *Burger's Daughter* (1979), which develops her awareness of the relation between history and politics.¹⁵

With *Burger's Daughter* Gordimer supposedly became a post-modern writer.¹⁶ In his perceptive review of the novel, Stephen Gray says much the same:

Its circuitry is incredibly complex: one has not only to read, but plough a way through it. The dense, knotted, tangled style compels total involvement, total concentration, on the reader's part, as Gordimer lines up areas of experience which, possibly, the reader does not know, cannot have known. Thus to know *Burger's Daughter* ... means, to us, the challenge of having to reshape and reform our own habits and expectations as readers.¹⁷

Gray is right to concentrate on the novel's challenge for it constantly asserts its own divisions and dislocations, its frequent changes in voice and tone. It is narratively complex in that, despite the focus on Rosa's story, other stories, perspectives, voices and historical events intrude to disrupt and impinge on the narrative. Even Rosa is seen from many angles – some sympathetic, others neutral or even hostile – so that it is very difficult to

choose one of these perspectives and decide on it as one of novelist's own. Such is the variety of perspectives that Rosa emerges as a complex character in a complex historical situation, "full of contradictions".¹⁸

She stands at the centre of the novel where several conflicting strands converge: the communist leanings of her father, an Afrikaner doctor, and his white involvement in the struggle for political justice. These at one point clash in Rosa's life with the desire of the Black Consciousness movement to exclude all whites from the struggle. In some ways, Rosa is presented as a passive character, the locus of warring forces, more than the initiator of action. Against that, she is also seen as a contradictory character, both attracted and repelled by her father's single-minded commitment to the struggle. At the end of the novel, a cyclical movement brings the childhood experience of visiting her father in prison to a point where she in turn is imprisoned for radical activities. The function of the 'circuitry' mentioned by Gray is thus to prevent the reader from simplifying Rosa, ensuring instead that she is seen as "a figure in a landscape, incredibly complex".¹⁹ The various narratives employed in *Burger's Daughter* express indeed the various aspects of Rosa's character. Despite the virtual anonymity that Rosa encounters at the end, which creates a surface pessimism, *Burger's Daughter*, which was temporarily banned in South Africa, is a work of heroic resistance for which Gordimer deserves the highest regard, for it celebrates, in her own words, the claims of "special responsibility to one's fellow men."²⁰

The histories of ordinary people, their tribulations and their aspirations, and the "human conflict" which marked Gordimer's fiction of the Seventies, persist in her most acclaimed novel, *July's People* (1984). Here, unlike *Burger's Daughter*, which shows the writer's formal interest in modernism as she deploys narrative strategies to heighten certain fictive dimensions, this book succeeds by shifting emphasis from psychological to social and historical determinants. In the introduction to her *Selected Stories*, Gordimer comments: "...in writing, I am acting upon my society, and in the

manner of my apprehension, all the time history is acting upon me.”²¹ Taken at face value, this appears to be an assertion that each novel by Gordimer reveals the social and political history of her native South Africa. It is both history and the apprehension of it in a society where it is especially difficult to chronicle history because of its changing nature – “full of strange inconsistencies”²² - which introduces ambiguity into life itself. This is the direction Gordimer takes in *July's People*.

Language too in the novel necessarily aims at a kind of simplicity and transparency, attempting to capture the broad sweep of possible historical social change that can come over a country after a major revolution. The fates of diverse characters are linked by a certain prophetic vision, which gives the novel a unique involvement with changes in the social and political attitudes of the people when history is acting upon them. In its daring to create the almost unimaginable crumbling of white mastery, *July's People* is primarily prophetic and admonitory, its warning incorporated at every stage in the depiction of the new roles thrust upon the white protagonists forced to flee from their white city to their servants' bush village.

Strikes and deaths in the townships, the currency of Gordimer's fiction from *The Lying Days* to *Burger's Daughter*, are dwarfed by the action of *July's People*. Here full-scale revolution, engulfing the whole country, has begun, as South Africa's blacks, aided by their neighbours, overthrow the white government with ground-to-air missile warheads and raze commercial centres and white suburbs. The Smales family, Maureen, Bam and their three young children, flee from their Johannesburg home to the village of their servant, July. For the four weeks spanned by the novel they live in his mother's hut, anxiously tuning their transistor radio for news of the revolution's outcome. Even at the end of the book the outcome is uncertain, though, whatever has happened, the Smales' world is irreparably destroyed. “Back there”, the phrase they used to refer to their lives of middle-class comfort, no longer exists and can never be re-created.

The transition between urban white affluence and rural black deprivation, which their servant had managed to span for fifteen years, is too violent for Maureen and Bam, though the children quickly adjust, learning the vernacular, eating *mealie pap*, and playing with July's children. For Maureen, the decent, liberal-thinking woman on whom the novel is largely focussed, the change is cataclysmic, transporting her to "another time, place, consciousness" (29). She feels, very soon after their arrival in the village, that she has been transformed utterly: "She was already not what she was. No fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know, could not have imagined or discovered through imagination"(29). Like Maureen's architect husband, *July's People* itself is a fiction that

struggled hopelessly for words that were not phrases from back there, words that would make the truth that must be forming here, out of the blacks, out of themselves (127).

Constantly reaching out to the silence of uncertainty, it is a novel that articulates what it would be like for a middle class white family to experience a transformation into 'blacks' harried from their home and bereft of accustomed physical and psychological supports.

The lack of material possessions in the village is what first impresses Maureen, the daughter of a white miner and wife of a rich architect:

They had nothing.

In their houses they had nothing. At first you had to stay in the dark of the hut a long while to make out what was on the walls. In the wife's hut a wavy pattern of broad white ochre bands. In others... she caught a glimpse of a single painted circle, an eye or target, as she saw it. In one dwelling where she was invited to enter there was the tail of an animal and a rodent skull, dried gut, dangling from the thatch. There were very small mirrors snapping at the stray beams of light like hungry fish rising. They reflected nothing. An impression – sensation - of seeing something

inextricably banal, manufactured, replicated, made her turn as if someone had spoken to her from back there (29).

The dried tail of an animal and the fleshless skull of a rat hark back to a similar scene in Gordimer's first novel, when Helen peers through the glass window of a local store at the dusty lion's tails(21). The properties in the two scenes are similar but a crucial change has occurred in the way the white spectator perceives them: in 1953 Helen can afford to look at them with the luxury of a curious spectator and walk away; in 1984 Maureen has to live in this environment because she has nowhere else to go.

The Smales are now July's people, relying on him for provisions, and for his friendly introduction to the village chief. As the revolution transforms July's "owners" into his guests and the villagers' "creatures, like their cattle and pigs"(96), the Smaleses are stripped of their material possessions. Their *bakkie* is neatly appropriated by July as a means to secure their groceries from town, and Bam's shotgun is stolen by a villager who goes to join the freedom fighters. The grammatical ambiguity embedded in the novel's title which gracefully embodies the altered relationship is also captured as Maureen and July, in the penultimate chapter, talk to each other, he in the vernacular and she in an English now swept clean of the need to patronise. This scene near the *bakkie* is a linguistic duel, leaving Maureen naked, without pretence or disguise; but it also incorporates efforts of transformation from the Other to become the Same which, however, flies in the face of her inadequacy in that role.

Next day, with an animal's desperation to survive, she runs towards the helicopter that has landed near the village, (heedless of whether it contains friend or foe):

She runs... trusting herself with all the suppressed trust of a lifetime, alert, like a solitary animal at the season when animals neither seek a mate nor take care of

young, existing only for their own survival, the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility (160).

At this point the novel breaks down into a problematic inconclusiveness which causes its political polemic and its feminist perspective to collapse into confusion.²³ This in turn undermines the very project of the novel. How are we to interpret Maureen's flight from the village, abandoning her husband and children? We might read it as a 'freedom run' to achieve personal liberation from the unbearable emotional isolation she suffers in the village as a consequence of her alienation from family and society. It could be read, on the other hand, as an affirmative action, a gesture which represents an attempt to take control of herself and her destiny, as suggested in the imagery of the animals that "neither seek a mate nor take care of young"(160). Or could we read it as a suicide run into the hands of the enemy? Or a pathetic attempt by a deranged woman to recover her long lost domesticity? To distort the conclusion, the helicopter may be understood to represent not only the unknown future but also some kind of redemption strongly suggested by Maureen's fording of the river with her shoes held high over her head, in defiance of the unseen rocks in the waters underfoot, to emerge "born again" (159).

Gordimer's text offers little assistance in our attempt to make sense of the indeterminate elements in this passage, nor are her recorded comments on the ending of the novel of any help. In a 1985 interview, she merely says that Maureen is -

taking her life in her own hands. My theory is that you never make sudden decisions. Things begin to decay inside her and something else begins to grow. So we reach at the end of that book for a moment of growth... Salvation exists doesn't it? ²⁴

Gordimer's argument that in times of radical uncertainty we strive for salvation reduces Maureen's flight to little more than a reflex action, which at

best can be interpreted as rejection of the 'bush life' she had fallen into, thus emphasising her inadequacy to become part of the African world. That she achieves personal growth is strongly suggested, but her political redemption remains in question. It is still in the embryonic stage offering little comfort to the reader. In the end Maureen's freedom resembles the bleak prospect available when moral and political ambiguities deepen after a revolution.

Because there is no possible logical solution available to such ambiguities, especially at a time in the history of South Africa (the late '80s) when revolution has lost its narrow and focussed trajectory, Gordimer enters still another phase in writing where central characters are seen from the outside or by others. Their lives are written by others, so we are given either no inner life or a treatment of it. There is often a strong undercurrent of parody, suggestive of literary allusion. In *July's People* Maureen's world of instinct cannot be known; we judge her action from a distance. *My Son's Story* (1991) calls its own truthfulness into doubt throughout by the narrator's bitterness over his father's infidelity, the knowing of the story through the son's narration and by the closing remark: "I am a writer and this is my first book – that I can never publish" (277).

There is such uncertainty everywhere and in all aspects of life that we may think it is the realm of private experience that Gordimer foregrounds in *My Son's Story* through the filtering eyes of the son, Will. But it is more than a private story. She observes life lived on the edge in highly charged political times; she is concerned with forms of escapism, survival, excitement and evasion, all of which characterise her sense of perception of people in political and social crises.

The plot of *My Son's Story* centres on an affair that transports the family-man Sonny into the underground world of resistance politics. The affair serves as a vivid symbol of an individual life divided between two kinds of loyalty, as well as between different engagements in the private and public

domains. Sonny collapses under the strain: he is stripped of political leadership, his marriage disintegrates, and his mistress finally leaves him for yet another human rights cause.

The novel begins as an autobiography in which the son tells the story of his father in the first person: "How did I find out? I was deceiving him"(3). Thus Will begins the story of his father's extramarital affair. The effect of the autobiographical beginning almost immediately qualifies the truth of an observation: the son is obviously hurt by his father's betrayal of his mother. Will says about his father's mistress Hannah: "I could have put her together like those composite drawings of wanted criminals you see in the papers, an identikit. The schoolboy's wet dream" (15). But the first person account is not retained throughout the novel. At different times, especially when uncertainty rules, the personal voice "I" vanishes and a third person narrator enters the tale. Though we may assume it to be Will's, we know it is Gordimer's voice as the author of the fictional Will who is the final guiding consciousness. Take for example the author's comment on Sonny's affair, though slightly coloured by Sonny's contemplation of himself:

He could not think of what had happened to him as 'love', 'falling in love' any more than, except as lip-service convenience, political jargon expressed for him his decision to sacrifice schoolmastering, self-improvement, and to go to prison for his kind (53).

Such observations are devoid of the anger and resentment experienced by the son who feels betrayed by an immoral father. Thus *My Son's Story* is not solely about infidelity. It is about people operating under conditions of stress: both Hannah and Sonny are involved in political community work in the days of the state of emergency. The nature of Hannah's work, for example, is described by the third person narrator as developing high emotions: "...to monitor the soaring graph of feelings that move men and women to act, endangering themselves" (89).

While Will judges Sonny harshly, there is also a kind of understanding that unusual times lead to unusual kinds of situations. Sonny the family man becomes a political underground activist, his wife Aila a revolutionary and their daughter Baby an arms-supplier for the revolution. His actions are not fully supported for we understand the flaws in his political commitment. But because of the complicated situation he is in, the reader is prevented from making any moral judgements. It seems Gordimer too, is in confusion about approaching revolutionary changes. Thus the general ambiguity in the novel permits readers to understand political commitment in all its human imperfections and to arrive at their own assessment of living in extreme times.

In this environment the only certainty is that Gordimer will continue to write, even if, as she said in an interview, "You must give yourself the freedom to write as if you were dead... Africa needs an articulated consciousness other than that of newspaper headlines and political speeches."²⁵ This statement was made way back in 1965, and ironically, this attitude of mind has resulted in the apocalyptic novel, *July's People*. Her 1990s *My Son's Story* and *None to Accompany Me* are more contemporary versions of articulating the consciousness of the time with a strong emphasis on family values. Though limitations can be found, for example in the sketchy metaphoric narrative of the work and in the academicism of many of the authorial comments, Gordimer has continued to unravel the consciousness of her age, extending it to a socio-aesthetic programme providing the future historian and social researcher with much that is needed to be known about South Africa during the last fifty years.

Anita Desai, a member of a “second generation” of anglophone Indian English novelists, acknowledges the dilemmas of the age by preferring to write in English rather than in Bengali, her first language.²⁶ In her fiction there are often tensions between the personal and the social and between traditions of the European novel and the urgencies of local socio-cultural politics. In both spheres, the personal and artistic, there is a strongly felt need to overcome feelings of being alienated and isolated by the burden of colonialism – historical and internal - and to become part of emerging contemporary life. Her novels increasingly have central characters who are rebellious or who offer views of modernisation and reform. Despite her desire to transcend the limitations of a female novelist writing in English, her fiction has its origin in the conflict between the art and concerns of the European novel and the need for self-realisation through autonomy.²⁷ The more outward and objective her fiction becomes, the more Desai self-consciously returns to the personal and subjective – the instinctual, the effects of family and society in creating conscience, English education as an expression of self, and especially the self in times of conflict and crisis.

Almost from her first novel, Desai was recognised as a self-conscious artist, a serious and careful writer, who treated contemporary issues arising from language and culture-politics. She tends to conform to the traditions of European and English fiction, while being at the forefront of establishing a new national literature in India.²⁸ Although she is categorised as a realist novelist, concerned with detailing the changes in society, including its socio-political and tradition-bound patriarchal injustices, Desai had, and still has, an unusual interest in the psychological possibilities of fiction. For some critics her writing is highly conscious artistically in its nuances, its metaphorical ornamentations, and self-conscious awareness of the traditions of written fiction.²⁹

While Desai seems well read, and at home with the trappings of Indian English novels - myth, dreamscapes, and magic realism - her early fiction seems to have experimented with themes of inner consciousness that throw light on a feminine consciousness. As the novels probed the inner dilemmas of individuals in a society wrought in the clashes of tradition and modernity, it became clear that the impossibility of reaching total fulfilment led to despair. The mixture of an East-West encounter, with its mainstream ideas of liberalism, individualism and social detail, required a new technique, a new form and a new consciousness. The personal and the artistic had to be firmly anchored in a rapidly-changing society. *Voices in the City*, with its main characters wallowing in deep despair, appeared a dead-end, as though the Indian novel about social disintegration, poverty and caste values could go no further in the atmosphere of a country reaching out for holistic development.

Since then Desai has tried to write the new novel of India while producing variations on the stream of consciousness novel. The new novel evolved seems to have become multi-voiced as its subject matter becomes the world of cultural syncretism, metamorphosis, social commitment, and colonial modernity, which includes discussions of means and ends in conflicting situations. In spite of the introduction of new forms, new themes to match the new social and cultural set-up, Desai's novels are focused mainly on family relations, moods and manners, and their effects on individual actions. Critics tend to see her novels as realistic portrayals of 'human conditions', as self-conscious examinations of the traditions from which Desai's writing has continued to develop.

RS Sharma suggests that a new direction begins with *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* with its broader, socio-psychic perspective. It introduces many of the concerns of the later fiction such as the fact that national independence has not led to total emancipation; that the uncertainties,

paradoxes and complexities of culture-conscious India, rather than strengthening the nation, lead it towards disintegration. Besides mirroring these outer realities, *Bye Bye Blackbird*, *Clear Light of Day*, and *Baumgartener's Bombay* allude to specific historical situations to show that her fiction can imaginatively examine individual lives within a changing historical situation.

In *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971), to which the Indo-Pakistan war provides a remote backdrop, Desai treats the theme of the East-West encounter, a theme that recurs in Indo-English literature and which has been given a variety of treatments. For example, Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and Manohar Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows* (1962) are two major novels dealing with this theme in different ways. Besides this theme, many of the ingredients of a post-modernist fiction, with its many voices, a confusion of facts that become the outline for fantasy, and a dislocated multiple narration are traceable in *Bye Bye Blackbird*. But, even as we describe in these terms, this novella is, in essence, about the inner spaces that the protagonists create in their lives as a means of survival.

Adit Sen represents a progressive young Indian who settles in England with his English wife, Sarah. He finds a job as a travel agent and appears content with life. Privately, like his fellow immigrants, he swallows the racial insults and humiliation to which he is continually subjected. Fed on English literature while in India, and exposed directly to English life and manners, he feels a sense of cultural affinity with his newly-chosen country. This closeness, however, does not blot out a sense of his cultural identity. He longs for Indian food, music and friends. This longing suddenly grows intense during one of his visits to Sarah's parents and from that time onwards Adit feels stifled and starved in the alien land and leaves for India with Sarah.

Adit is depicted as a liberal-minded Indian who has joined the international order as a world citizen. To leave England at the outbreak of the Indo-Pak war is a private decision he takes, discovering his own private space. Hence the conclusion is ambiguous. Facts and fears merge in an unreliable narrative that gives no confirmation of the success of a mixed marriage; and the subjectivity of the main character over the loss of his identity is invaded by the external world of politics and war.

Adit, however, cannot be reduced to an allegorisation of the failure of an immigrant Indian to adjust to the pressures of intercultural relationships, although that is certainly one theme of *Bye Bye Blackbird*. Critics like K Aithal, while comparing Adit with Raja Rao's Rama (in *The Serpent and the Rope*), are quick to dismiss him as an undemanding character.³⁰ For all his faults and attitudes, Adit is not a colourless hero. The method of narration plus the richness of the comic humour that Desai employs ensures readers' interest and sympathy. This has not been done to entrap the reader by offering both Indian and English characters who hold prejudiced attitudes to each other and by depicting the social isolation as the centre of consciousness. There are examples in Desai's novels of energy, intelligence, and strength of will, where political and social irrelevances are criticised, understood and appreciated.

Some of the power of *Bye Bye Blackbird* lies in its sensitive authorial sympathy for the plight of the Indian immigrant who cannot sever his cultural roots yet makes an effort to strike new ones. It can also be felt in its appreciation of the glorious heritage of India and its recognition of the progressive outlook of a young Indian intellectual. Desai understands that to transcend racial and cultural polarities and embrace the world without the East-West dichotomy is a natural instinct for an intellectual; and this same energy and desire to become a world citizen makes Adit marry Sarah and settle in England. But he embodies the contradictions of modern life that accompany liberal thinking. If *Bye Bye, Blackbird* concludes with Adit's

decision to leave for India, we must take it as the result of a clash between the ego and the uncertainties of the time. As often seen in modern literature, psychology, social and cultural politics are in conflict. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Desai creatively expands on the socio-political ambiguities characteristic of a post-colonial post-modernist novel and even goes a step further by questioning the myth of the Mother Goddess which has such a hold on the public imagination of India.

Citing the representation of woman as Mother Goddess "from whom all good things flow" Desai says:

... in each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife, unswerving in her devotion to her lord. She is meek, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving. Even when spirited and brave, she adheres to the archetype; willing to go through fire and water, dishonour and disgrace for his sake.³¹

It is this reified image of maternity that Desai challenges in her later fiction in a variety of ways by constructing alternative versions of the idea of the maternal. The figure of the maternal emerges as one with multiple possibilities, a trope with both "repressive and emancipatory potential".²⁹ *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* (1975), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), and *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) are examined as a way of interpreting Desai's exploration of the complex relationship between freedom and responsibility involving the maternal figure in independent India. Desai tends to dissociate herself from any women's movement but her construction of the maternal in these three novels challenges the traditional representation of motherhood as female subjectivity.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? is the story of Sita, a pregnant woman terrified of bringing her fifth child into what she perceives as a violence-ridden world. The text presents her overwrought mental condition as the cumulative outcome of a difficult childhood followed by a stressful marriage. Neglected by their father, a committed freedom fighter, and deserted when

very young by their mother, Sita and her siblings, Jivan and Rekha, are "flower children of the independence movement,"(84) deprived of a normal family life:

Sita had imagined she came into this world motherless - and the world was crowded enough so... [she] belonged, if to anyone, to this whole society that existed at that point of history - like a lamb does to its flock - and saw no reason why she should belong to one family alone(84).

After independence, they move to a house on the island of Manroi, where Sita suffers loneliness and neglect under the shadow of a talented elder sister whose closeness to the father carries incestuous overtones. The father, a charismatic personality, becomes a cult figure among the local villagers, compelling their participation in his vision of Manroi as a pre-industrial idyll. Domination, silence and a sense of betrayal haunt Sita throughout her childhood.

Soon she marries Raman and moves to Bombay, where her sense of maladjustment is intensified by exposure to a life in a middle class joint family and a relationship with a husband immersed in the mundane world of business affairs. The compliant role she is expected to play in a world characterised by "insularity and complacency" (49) as well as "aggression and violence"(50) generates gradual stages of disenchantment and despair, leading to a disturbed emotional state during her fifth pregnancy. In her fevered imagination even trivial incidents become horrific revelations of the chaos and destructiveness that are characteristic of post-independence India. Nightmarish images churn into visions of global violence directed against her unborn child, a symbol of her insecurity (55). In a gesture of rebellion, she abandons her husband to seek shelter in Manroi:

If reality were not to be borne, then illusion was the only alternative. She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby, safely unborn, by magic (101).

The narrative charts the time she spends on the island, during the monsoon of 1967, wrestling with her trauma, aggravated by the reproachful attitude of her children and the hostility of the caretakers. The text includes, in flashback form, memories of earlier episodes in her life marking 1947 as a time of transition when Sita's family had first moved to Manroi. Faced now with the primitive conditions of the island where her father had barred the entry of modern technology, Sita begins to realise that her idyllic image of Manroi was an illusion, created and sustained by her father. She is forced to admit that her father's rhetoric had been fostered by deliberate falsehoods, which she herself and the islanders had supported out of loyalty. This stripping away of illusion creates the ground for Sita's eventual acceptance of her circumstances and her decision to return to the mainland and Bombay.

Such is the background of Sita's temporary rejection of the maternal role. Her desire to abort the child represents, as SM Asnani points out, Desai's questioning of a society that regards woman as "a breeding machine"(49).³² In addition, Sita's urge to violate the normal biological cycle expresses her will to resist the identification of femininity with reproductive functions, as well as protectiveness towards a child who is a metaphor of her own vulnerability:

More and more she lost all feminine, all maternal belief in childbirth, all faith in it, and begin to fear it as yet one more act of violence and murder in a world that had more of them in it than she could take (56).

Although Sita abhors the oppression of the cultural inscription of maternity, she does not reject mothering as a life-sustaining attitude. The opposite of her fear of violence is an urge to cherish and protect, expressed for instance, in her anxiety over the fate of the injured eagle targeted by blood-thirsty crows (26). There is thus a basic ambiguity in Desai's textual

projection of the maternal. This ambiguity is generally overlooked in the critical interpretation of the ending of the novel, which has been variously read as a defeatist concession to traditional systems, a valorization of critical realism over mythical mode and an expression of Desai's firm belief in affirmative human values.³³ Although there is a suggestion of Sita's return to the domestic fold, the ending does not really resolve the dilemma that torments her divided subjectivity. She accepts the inevitability of the birth of her child, but the prospect of childbirth does not offer her any joy: "once the infant was born... Sita would lie still as though paralysed in a fearful accident, with blue lips and a grey sensation of death"(154). Here the customary celebration of maternity is deliberately overturned.

The ambiguity of the ending is further represented in the cultural specificity of the projection of the maternal in the novel. Desai's use of the *Ramayana* myth underscores this point. In the epic, it is the fact of Sita's maternity which is seen to justify her reintegration into society following the doubts cast on her purity after abduction and exile: "Rama repents and is ready to take Sita back from her exile in the forest after he sees his sons for the first time".³⁴ The story, however, has a subversive potential, if Sita's return to her mother, the earth, is read as an act of defiance against unjust societal norms. Both dimensions of the myth find expression in Desai's use of the name for a protagonist who locates in the maternal the fusion of her split subjectivity.³⁵

Desai's attempt at exploring yet another complex relationship in maternity is seen in *Clear Light of Day*. In this novel surrogate mothering is considered as a meaningful mode of the maternal. Two sisters, Bim and Tara, try to recollect their childhood when they meet, after a long separation, in their family home in Old Delhi. They remember their childhood dreams, the "summer of '47", the death of their parents, and the gradual disintegration of their family. Their brother, Raja, has settled in Hyderabad after marrying the daughter of their Muslim neighbour, Hyder Ali. Tara, married to a diplomat,

is now the proud mother of two children. Bim, a university lecturer, has remained single, staying behind in the old house to take care of their autistic brother Baba, and their alcoholic aunt, Mira Masi. The two sisters' foray into the past becomes an attempt to retrieve lost or repressed childhood as a way of coming to terms with their present predicament. Differences in attitude and temperament towards the same recollected episodes make each sister aware of her own shortcomings. Bim, watching her widely travelled sister, realises that her claim of independence is only an illusion, masking the actual stagnation of her existence in Old Delhi. Tara, who normally prides herself on being a perfect wife and mother, realises that she has dwindled into a mere shadow of her husband Bakul.

The virtual absence of their parents is the most poignant feature of their recollection. Their father is nothing more than the "master of entrances and exits"(21) and their mother, the text suggests, is preoccupied with playing cards, even in her dying moments (22). Although her neglect of domestic duties has a devastating effect on the children, the narrative makes it clear that it is the result of prolonged passive suffering inflicted by a dominating husband. The visual image of their father assaulting their mother (23) is an early memory that the children carry throughout, triggering the subconscious fear which haunts Tara's relationship with her own husband.

Things are not much different with the neighbours, the Misras. The Misra sisters are back in their father's house, after their husbands have abandoned them, trying now to eke out a living from music and dance lessons while their brothers lead an indolent life. Since the sisters are back in the family house and are also childless, the brothers abdicate their responsibilities and live off their sisters' labours. The Misra sisters also fear their brothers abandoning them if they fail to add something to the domestic income.

An extreme version of the dependency of the Misra sisters is Mira Masi, a childless widow who is now at the Das household as a surrogate mother. The role of nurturer is not chosen by her but thrust upon her by circumstances. She seizes it as a way of justifying her presence in the household, accepting the parasitism around her:

They drew from her and she gave readily - she could not have not given. Would it weaken her? Would she be stronger if she put them away and stood by herself, alone? No, that was not her way any more than it was the way of nature... she was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth (111).

There are suggestions of an ecofeminist stance in the imagery of tree and soil in this passage. The capacity for love is celebrated even as its exploitation by others is exposed; the twin face of mothering is thus invoked.

The willingness to give takes its toll on surrogate mothers in this novel: it drives Mira Masi to death and Bim to the brink of nervous collapse. But the death of Mira Masi and its lingering presence in the house paradoxically throws into relief for Bim the elements of duty, responsibility, resilience and connectedness to others:

With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences... giving them the soil to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives... that soil contained all time, past and future in it... it was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and her brothers and all those who shared that time with her (182).

This visionary insight enables Bim to rise above her solipsism and to move towards reconciliation with her family members, especially Raja. But the ubiquitous memory of Mira Masi that "she was the soil, she was the earth"(111), and the troubled recognition that she and her family are rooted

in and nurtured by the dark secret soil of their history, is a reminder that reconciliation is only at the superficial level. Shirley Chew draws our attention to the unresolved trauma of Mira Masi, whose tragedy continues to haunt the narrative (52).³⁶ Thus, despite its poignant attempt at closure, resolution and reconciliation, the narrative leaves a sense of limited options available to middle-class Indian women restricted by society's circumscription of their lives.

Yet Bim's awareness of the interconnectedness of "separate histories"(182) that triggers love and reconciliation with her siblings seem linked by coincidence rather than by the intrinsic logic (182) we encounter in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980).³⁷ But Desai's text moves beyond the logical to the intuitive and the emotional to suggest that it is the 'real' world with which it is imperative to connect. In her role as substitute mother, we should assume, Bim discovers her own mode of connection.

In *Journey to Ithaca*, the domain of the mother is no longer the private sphere, but the public forum of the *ashram*, a place for the collective pursuit of the spiritual. The "Mother" here represents, not nurture and sacrifice, but the powerful role of spiritual leadership. A symbol of female power, this enigmatic character adds a different dimension to Desai's exploration of the ambiguous potential of the trope of maternity.

The figure of the Mother is part of a central triangle of characters whose personal pilgrimages form the backbone of a narrative that spans several continents in a time frame stretching from the beginning of the century to the 1970s. Inspired by Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East* (1932), Matte, a young Italian, joins the hippie influx of the 1970s. With him is his wife Sophie, whose practical spirit is numbed by the confusion and squalour she encounters in India. Their wanderings lead them to the *ashram* of the Mother, whose charisma leaves everyone spell-bound except Sophie. Neglected by Matteo and jealous of his devotion to the Mother, Sophie sets out to uncover the Mother's hidden life story, hoping to prove the spiritual

leader to be a fraud. As Sophie unfolds the story of Laila (the Mother's original name) another story of passion and creativity unfolds. The trail leads to Egypt, where Laila grew up in a society divided between colonial modernisation and religious traditionalism; to Paris where she suffers alienation from her milieu in spite of her involvement as a trainee in Western dance; to Venice where she joins the Indian dance troupe led by Krishna, her guru and lover; and to New York, where disillusionment leads her to physical and mental breakdown. A long lost diary records Laila's return to India and her meeting with a guru who introduces her to a spiritual path, becoming her mentor. Sophie's journey brings her back to the *ashram* where she hears that the Mother has died, and Matteo, distraught, has vanished. She must now undertake another quest, to seek out her husband: "Now she knew why the Mother went on the pilgrimage, why anyone goes on a pilgrimage, and why she must go too" (297).

The quest motif, a trademark of Desai's texts, finds repetition here. Both Laila and Sophie, in spite of their differences in age, temperament and circumstance, are misfits-turned-rebels whose separate stories suggest a link between their destinies. The spirit of questioning and rebellion connects their stories. Both reject the security of home and hearth, in contrast to Sita and Bim, to satisfy their wanderlust, which is really a desire to discover an authentic identity. The India they encounter strikes them as alien and treacherous, but it is to India they return to chart the future course of their lives. The Mother's adoption of a spiritual path and Sophie's desire to search for Matteo are assumptions of responsibility involving love and an acceptance of the need to reach out and care for others.

For Laila, absence of domestic constraints, especially those associated with biological motherhood, acts as an enabling factor in her metamorphosis into the Mother. The Mother's power and authority as the spiritual leader is derived from her renunciation of the domestic, the physical, and the material. That the Mother enjoys power and dislikes competition is evident in

her manipulative marginalisation of Sophie in order to monopolise Matteo's attention. The struggle to possess Matteo's soul highlights the moral ambiguity of the two women who love him. While Sophie's wish to expose the Mother's hypocrisy has overtones of jealousy and revenge, the Mother's motives remain equally dubious. Is she the saint that everyone, especially Matteo, thinks her to be, or a power-hungry woman that Sophie detects beneath the mask of sanctity? We are not quite sure. The narrative does not make it clear.

Unlike Laila, Sophie is a wife and mother, though, like several other mothers in Desai's text, she too is irresponsible. She abandons her children to pursue her personal goals. Her background makes this neglect of domestic duties possible, until, at the end of her pilgrimage, she, like Sita and Bim before her, understands the paradoxical relationship between freedom and responsibility in maternity. She compromises with the demands of her particular situation. The task of mothering exposes her to exploitation - especially by her husband who depends on her; but as Desai's texts repeatedly suggest, this is a risk that the gift of love must entail.

Finally, in the fictional world of *Journey to Ithaca*, women as substitute mothers are empowered to challenge the existing order, while the male protagonist Matteo, in spite of his visionary qualities, emerges as an elusive, almost an insignificant, figure. Caught between two assertive women, Matteo becomes lonely and withdrawn. He turns to the philosophy of peace and spirituality and, like the male protagonists of *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*, becomes an impractical dreamer, dreaming of world peace and universal brotherhood. The representation of male figures as marginal signifies, perhaps, more than anything else, that Desai's female characters' empowerment - stepping out from the private world into the realm of collectivity, as the spiritual mother for instance - is a celebration of autonomy for women. R Chakravarthy reads it as a naïve representation of freedom and autonomy of the female since, according to her, the spiritual

leader remains "relatively segregated from the arena of mainstream public life. Both the mother and Sophie remain aloof from the Indian characters, especially the women who hover on the fringes of the narrative, suggesting the persistence of mental and cultural barriers yet to be crossed".³⁸ More enabling incarnations of the maternal, suitable to the context of contemporary India, are thus suggested to indicate that the coming years may bring new creations by Desai of this kind.

III

Both Gordimer and Desai are courageous and serious writers. Their contribution to post-modernist and post-colonialist fiction is unquestionable as they prove themselves to be productive and successful contemporary authors, ready to experiment with new fictional trends and causing considerable puzzlement as to what they are doing. Many readers feel that especially their later fiction has a prominent place among the classics of our time, including those of Woolf and Henry James. While Bruce King sees Gordimer's fiction as a theorised and analytical revision of modern European fiction and its discontents,³⁹ John Cooke and Michael Wade show that she is very much a product of the past.⁴⁰ Similar critical opinions are offered about Desai: KR Srinivasa Iyengar writes that Desai has added a new dimension to Indian English fiction, but that her forte is the exploration of the inner world of sensibility rather than the outer word of action.⁴¹ DS Maini and SM Asnani find her a realist artist who also turns inward to show a narcissistic self⁴² – and who makes attempts to turn the mirror outward to record the lives of ordinary people, their tribulations and triumphs.

As Gordimer and Desai continue to write fiction, so will the range of comments about that writing continue to grow. There is a great deal written about them already, particularly in their own countries where their work is of immediate relevance. The complexity of their work is prominently

emphasised in critical commentary. Moreover, their interest in probing old preoccupations in new ways affords the pleasure of the familiar and the satisfaction of expecting something new in each work that emerges.

Chapter 4

LANDSCAPE REPRESENTATIONS

Ah, what an Age it is
When to speak of trees is almost a crime
For it is a kind of silence about injustice.

The quotation is from Bertolt Brecht's poem 'An die Nachgeborenen', 'To Posterity'.¹ He writes of various images that express the desires and experiences that landscape can evoke. The prime beauty of images is that they are not always an exact representation of the physical and social environment they reveal, but can, in varying degrees, reflect the infinitely varied experience of history, culture and people. They may be either simplifications or exaggerations of history and culture, written to direct or motivate. The landscape representations that Gordimer and Desai present in their fiction function in this way; while depicting the general character of the terrain, they also specify its history, identity and even the tradition of thinking of which the writers are a part. In the process new trends can be detected.

This chapter seeks to examine, first, the intellectual schemas through which South Africa has been perceived by Europe, then Gordimer's perception of the land and landscape. As for Desai, the chapter examines the negative connotations that the landscape generates in her work, which contrasts with other Indian authors who write with a sense of patriotic belonging to the soil of their homeland. Finally, the chapter looks at landscape as a vision of these writers directed by a Eurocentric perspective which seems to set up a tension between their subjective emotional orientation and their national feeling.

As a South African of European descent, Gordimer inherits something of the insecurity of the transplanted colonial with an ambiguous identity who has to

invent an explicit mythology of land to explain her status. Her origin in Europe characterises her as a settler in South Africa whose landscape has to be explored before she can achieve a sense of belonging. The plethora of direct comment on Gordimer's landscape evocation (Rich, Cooke, Wagner, Coetzee) indicates that the author creates a mythology for her settings and for those of the characters who inhabit them. This has probably compelled Gordimer to admit that her landscape drawing should be understood as the work of

a romantic struggling with reality; for surely this very engagement implies innate romanticism? Do realists question the meaning of reality and its relationship to it? ²

It may be said that this confession, written in 1965, is tinged with embarrassment and nervousness – all products of her history as a colonial with an ambiguous identity. But it also exhibits the unconcealed truth about the development of Gordimer's emotional response to Africa and her later practice in which representations of place are yoked to the ideological project of speaking for Africa. To use her own words, her early concern with "catching the shimmer of things" shifts to a preoccupation "not with how but with why".³ This explains many of the subjective pressures and social obligations under which her work has grown and developed.⁴ But, before we discuss the tensions and contradictions between private and public demands that underlay her psychic life, here is a brief outline of landscape presentation as variously sketched by other South African writers.

The few critical studies on this subject suggest that the tradition of landscape description in South Africa was largely received from and associated with European sensibilities and aesthetic expectations and not from an African 'way of seeing it'.⁵ That is, African space was generally perceived by white writers as 'inhospitable', 'hostile' and 'intractable'. Such perceptions among the early settler writers produced an image of South Africa of a Karoo kind, "desolate and wild... empty and barren, rocks and stones scattered all around", a terrain that did not lend itself to picturesque description. The metaphors evoked by such a description of the land were those of alienation,

exile and isolation which characterised, by and large, the works of Schreiner, Smith and Millin. The perceived hostility soon came to be looked upon by writers as an explanation for the unsuccessful transplantation of the settlers and the harshness of the established society based on racism. This perspective of place takes a prominent place in Paton's work, in spite of his evocative descriptions of the green Natal landscape in *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948). A later novelist, André Brink, in *A Chain of Voices* (1982), offers a bridging twist in the metaphor of aridity with a splendid celebration of his 'Hottentot Eve' as a symbol of ability and endurance, like the mountains and rocks of the Karoo region which critics, such as Coetzee, see as an acknowledgement of the indigenous land, reflecting a move, so to say, towards a post-colonial thinking about the terrain.

JM Coetzee's remark, in his 1988 study of early poetry and fiction, *White Writing* - "I think our experience remains largely colonial"⁶ - reminds us that the cultural tradition(s) attached to art and writing, paradoxically, remain a stereotyped version of the Euro-tradition for many South African writers. It is doubtful if Coetzee's statement received unanimous approval from South African critics, but it does throw light on an area of concern with which writers, especially white writers, had to come to terms: namely, the colonial heritage.

Two related topics need to be mentioned in the light of the above argument. First, Coetzee attempts to show that settler writing about Africa falls into the category of the 'exotic', that is, presenting Africa in mystical terms similar to the image of Africa found in the works of Rider Haggard and John Buchan, or, as the 'Other' developed in *The Lusiads* by the seventeenth-century Portuguese poet Luis de Camoens. Second, the exotic and the 'Other' generate a paradoxical bent of mind to look at Africa, as Stephen Gray has said, with the conceptual framework of a frontier myth that comes to symbolise "both the attractions and the intractabilities of inland, that unknown terrain."⁷ What we can deduce from this, and from what Gray suggests in the rest of the essay, is that the intermingled strands of

attraction and repulsion that gave way to white dominance, and ultimately to the divide between 'us' and 'them' in South Africa, underpins and survives European responses to the continent, and continues, even now, among white writers, to shape the metaphoric construction of the South African landscape.⁸

Inhospitable Africa with its rocks and stone and the Adamastor myth of Luis de Camoens are not the only images that have engaged writers' imagination. Various other modes of landscape depiction, such as pastoralism and the picturesque, were imported into the colonies and created their own exoticism.⁹ Coetzee in *White Writing* discusses the residual presence of European Romantic landscape art associated with reflection, contemplation, and the values attached to nature in South African writing; and he goes on to suggest that this modified idea of the picturesque controlled the structure and perspective of many early descriptive passages about the land. Later, according to Coetzee, with the growth of nationalism, the sublime – a projection of beauty, grandeur, progress and expansion – began to emerge in a “tentative and stunted way”.¹⁰ Meanwhile, he asks whether it is possible for a white English language writer to develop an authentically African voice for the African experience. He calls this “the burden of finding a home in Africa”.¹¹ However, the real issue regarding the place of a writer of European origin in the African landscape lies in historical insecurity – in the words of Coetzee, “an insecurity not without cause”¹² (cf. Clingman's *History from the Inside* 1986), which is a dominant ingredient in Gordimer's understanding of South Africa and its landscape. It is in the light of these arguments that an examination of Gordimer's landscape representation will be attempted here.

Exotic Africa

We may begin by accepting that Gordimer was well aware of John Buchan's version of Africa as 'exotic', disseminated in popular literature, and she

vigorously rejected this in explicit ways in fiction, articles and essays. This was made clear in an autobiographical sketch in 1954 in which she observed, "The fact of the matter is that this noble paradise of "real Africa" (created by writers and film directors) is, as far as the Union of South Africa is concerned, an anachronism."¹³ A year earlier she echoed the same thought in her first published novel, *The Lying Days*, in which Helen says of her life on the mine that it was not "even anything like the life of Africa, the continent, as described in the books about Africa"(96).

The earnest truthfulness of her attempt to reflect the land continued in her second novel, *A World of Strangers*. Here the 'exotic' tourist paradise of Mombasa is set in the framework of a hunter's grave. The hostile thorny landscape yields only death - the death of the birds and of the faithful dog Gracie - and the collapse of two relationships: one of Steven Sitole, who dies in a car accident, and the other of Cecil Rowe. However, Toby's decision to stay on in Africa at the end of the novel ironically makes of him, according to Cooke, the antithesis of a colonial adventurer who plunders and goes home.¹⁴

But Toby's decision not to return to England lends itself to a modern version of colonialism. At the end of a brutal hunting expedition, lost in the bush with a dying dog, and virtually stripped of all external associations, he identifies an inward connection with "the ancient continent"(245) and experiences in the intractable vastness of the land "a state of grace" (289).

Gordimer's personal sense of the continent is much the same - abstract and intractable - and she articulated it in 1961 in quasi-romantic-philosophical terms:

The problem of Africa, the idea of Africa and what she stands for imaginatively; the mixture of the old legendary continent and the new one drawing its first breath when the rest of the world is tired - this abstract Africa is becoming an element of the spiritual consciousness of the peoples of the modern world... Today, the European or American can conceive of his Africa - not a physical concept of jungles and

deserts and wild beasts and black men, but a state of regeneration... This Africa is a fearful place, but in the danger lies the hope of virtue. This Africa is of course really only a new name for an old idea - man's deep feeling that he must lose himself in order to find himself.¹⁵

Here, apart from its exoticism, Gordimer's emphasis is on Africa's symbolic significance for the Western imagination. As a place of hope, it is both regenerative and utopian. "Instinct is utopian. Emotion is utopian... Without utopia - the idea of utopia - there is a failure of the imagination - and that is a failure to go on living" (162). Sasha says this in *A Sport of Nature*; from which we gather that the land's power is to be measured in modern times in spiritual rather than in material terms. Similarly, critic and writer Gray thinks that the utopian idea articulates emotional and moral unease with the fruits of conquest and remains a constant in white South African writing to the present day.¹⁶ This explains the continuing impact of the continent upon the Westerner and also reveals the extent to which the older western sense of Africa as exotic and 'Other' survives in spiritual terms in contemporary thinking.

An appealing consequence of the utopian impact is to regard land in terms of aesthetic appreciation. This idea probably has its origin in an attempt by writers to capture a modified version of the European picturesque in Africa - a distant version of Wordsworth's theory that landscape can be composed as a significant whole in the imagination. In Coetzee's opinion, this neo-aestheticism sees the (South African) landscape as possessing a certain "harmonious beauty" deserving study and appreciation.¹⁷ Gordimer's general impression of the African landscape is, to a great extent, based on this assumption. Infinitely varied as Africa is, once the eye of the imagination gets used to its subtle and subdued values, the barren and empty landscape tends to be filled with matter; barrenness recedes to the background; raw beauty and intensity of colour come to the fore. Sasha's utopian imagery mentioned above fairly illustrates what imagination is capable of: the landscape gets filled with shades of green and gold (*The Lying Days*); mountains crack like glass shattered by a giant's note never sung before (*A*

Sport of Nature); even the dusty earth is turned into a glass of fine wine, bringing out a depth of glow (*The Conservationist*).

More enhancing and stimulating than utopian imagery, but analogous to it in presentation, is Gordimer's perception of landscape as a subject of contemplation and retreat. Take, for instance, Helen's response in *The Lying Days* as she gets off the train at Katembi River:

at the end of the strip of coal grit, like a short carpet abruptly rolled, thick bush, green and black, green and hard with light reached up and closed in high, singing with hot intimacy far within and dead still to the eye (48).

The spiritual wholeness the land is able to provide balm to a fragmented urban psyche troubled by racial conflicts in Johannesburg. This same idea Gordimer develops using the sea in *Occasion for Loving*, in which we find Jessie fleeing from Johannesburg to a beach cottage. She looks out on the first morning and feels that "the sea moved towards her shinningly out of the night; it was immortality, it had been there all the time"(185). As we advance down the page we find that Jessie passes on the sea's spiritual quality to the beach cottage: "The walls ... were not grown thick with layer on layer of human personality, but were thin and interchangeable" (186). And, living in such an atmosphere of inner harmony, where the body and soul function in perfect integration, Jessie moves into a state of intuitive harmony. Then she communes with the elements of the natural world at a level beyond the conscious or the rational, as she responds to the porpoises:

Every day, no matter what she was doing, she looked out at the sea and saw the porpoises passing. She had no idea that they were going to be passing, but when she looked out, there they went. She had this. It had survived. Neither petrol fumes nor phenobarbital, book-keeping nor all night drinking parties had finished it. Living creatures came by out there in the wide water and she was able to know it. She had no means of communicating with them except whatever it was that made her know when they were there; there was no reason to suppose that they did not have the same sort of knowledge about her (191).

Gordimer obviously attaches enormous importance to the influence of the sea, and several more examples occur in her novels. In *The Lying Days* Helen awakens to the depths of her sexual being at the seaside. Ann in *Occasion for Loving* realises the importance of becoming part of mainstream life during her walk on the beach with Gideon. It is at the seaside that both Helen and Ann acquire a certain degree of self-knowledge. The significance of water in landscape is taken a step further in *The Conservationist* which explores the possibility of water as a purifying natural element: flood water washes up the buried body on Mehring's farm thus forcing him to accept the corruption of his inner self. Similarly, at the end of *July's People*, we see Maureen wading through a river "like some member of a baptismal sect to be born again"(159).

We may, then, accept that Gordimer finds the sea (water) rich in meaning, perhaps something similar to what the artist Watson said: "These rich volumes of nature, like the works of established authors, will bear frequent perusal."¹⁸ It is the reflective medium in nature, transparent, and its transparency renders it penetrable into its depths by the eye, the mind. So, in water, like Narcissus, Gordimer's characters see themselves and come to self-awareness; in many instances for the first time. We must not be surprised to find Gordimer losing herself in a Wordsworthian perspective in all these instances, except that it is not lakes, rivers, streams and pools that she chooses for constructing her most meaningful scenery but the sea. Lack of surface water on South Africa's landscape may have led to this sea option, we should assume.

However, one might miss a point here. It is true that Gordimer's characters find the sea an archetypal site for refuge and self-discovery. But she does not allow communion with nature to offer a permanent solution to their lives' dilemmas. As far as communion with nature is concerned, it is only, as Ward suggests about the representation of the sea in Gordimer's novels, "the wish-fulfilment of a desire to evade human complexity."¹⁹ Its promise is illusory, a delusion. "It is nothing to build on", as one of her characters

confesses. As apartheid is made more and more institutionalised, solace from nature becomes less achievable. For instance, Jessie in *Occasion for Loving*, on hearing about beach apartheid, looks

with a kind of disbelief at the wild, innocent landscape; the rain calmed sea, the slashed heads of strelitzia above the bush almost translucent green with the rush of sap. The sun put a warm hand on her head. But nothing was innocent here. There was no corner of the whole country that was without ugliness (259).

"But nothing was innocent here". Racial differences are apparent, and they cannot be transcended in idyllic settings and by the sea. For a developed heart such as Jessie's, for a short while, a Conradian imagery of indifference to the natural world and to the petty flow of human affairs is more valid, and such resonances are heard on many occasions. In *The Lying Days* Helen calls nature the "impersonal world which in itself surely negates all intimacy"(56). Toby, in *A World of Strangers*, is lost in the bush in "the indifference of the empty afternoon" (235); for Bray, the old fig tree in his garden stands with "unreachable indifference"(AWS 464). Conrad's influence indeed is indirectly acknowledged in *Occasion for Loving* where we are told that Jessie reads *Victory* at the beach. But Gordimer does not cling to the imagery of indifference, which altogether negates the principle of life by contemplating a godless, meaningless heart of darkness.

The reason for such a stand could be that the rich fecundity of Natal, which was Gordimer's childhood haven, "was not jungle; it made no darkness. It shone and shook and swayed in the sun"(OFL 186). Critics have sometimes claimed that her fascination with the African landscape lies in its untarnished natural quality; or, to use Gordimer's phrase, in its fertile rawness. Listen to the words of Bray in *A Guest of Honour* as he describes Roly Dando's African garden:

Coarse and florid shrubs, hibiscus with its big flowers sluttish with pollen and ants and poinsettia oozing milk

secretion, bloomed, giving a show of fecundity to the red, poor soil running baked bald under the grass... (18).

The whole passage is long and descriptive, imbued with wonder at the very process of life taking shape in its own patterns, suggesting an indomitable vitality in the African landscape. In the same paragraph we read:

A rich stink of dead animal rose self-dispersed like a gas... It was the smell of growth... the process of decay and regeneration so accelerated, brought so close together it produced the reek of death and life all at once (18).

The landscape described here significantly differs from the genteel decorous countryside of England with which Bray is familiar. Here, Africa is raw, entirely absorbed in the processes of its growth, indifferent to the niceties of human life, and giving an alienated sense of 'Otherness' to the foreigner Bray. Furthermore, we can sense a subtle indication that, although the beauty of archetypal Africa is tarnished by colonial intrusion and the racist regime, the continent can retain its strength and creativity by its sheer 'Otherness'.

Africa as the 'Other' is thus a common enough image in Gordimer's fiction. The origin and development of this, as we might expect, is not totally African. It has a European model - namely the Adamastor myth popularised in South African literary history by the Portuguese poet Camoens, in the epic poem *The Lusiads* (1572). The figure of Adamastor appears in Canto V of this poem when Vasco da Gama and his fleet approach the Cape of Storms on their historic voyage to India. A cloud in the shape of a monstrous being suddenly towers over them, and reproaches the Portuguese sailors for intruding into his region. This is a strange story but stirring enough to capture the imagination of generations of South African writers. Re-workings of the Adamastor myth have appeared, of which André Brink's short novel, *The First Life of Adamastor*, is but one recent production in a long line of invented versions.

As Gray has suggested, in European perception and in settler writing "the figure of Adamastor is at the root of all [subsequent] white semiology invented to cope with the African experience."²⁰ Nevertheless, in the same essay Gray describes Adamastor as both strange and menacing, and, adds, "he is mimical, and seen across a barrier, he belongs to an older but defeated culture, and is likely to sink the new European enlightenment if allowed within its purlieu".²⁰ What Gray suggests as Gordimer's dominant romantic thinking is a vision of the death of the colonial era and the phoenix-like resumption of power by the black masses which, regardless of the effects of colonialism, takes its renewed strength and resilience from colonial culture.

Adamastor as the 'Other' will rise again. When viewed in this scenario, the appearance of the buried corpse on Mehering's estate in *The Conservationist* marks the regenerative powers of the colonised black community to find ways of reasserting itself. Though nameless and without family (as a result of detribalisation and urbanisation brought in by the coloniser-exploiter Mehering), at the end of the novel the corpse is given a proper burial to become merged with the land.

Thus, we may say that Gordimer regards land as both a moral agent and a retreat. When the idyllic, the pastoral and the utopian romantic are incorporated into the appreciation of landscape, it obtains an added glow. Mehering, the British industrialist, escapes to his farm in the African countryside during weekends for rejuvenation; and for several other jetsetting characters in Gordimer's writing, the African interior, untarnished by human civilisation, is also a much sought after retreat.

Critics like Christopher Hope think that "the shapely categories of European pastoralism and romanticism are invalid"²¹ in the works of Gordimer, but there is no doubt that the Eurocentric literary tradition in which she grew up has influenced her to internalise Romantic pastoralism. This is laid bare in her acute sensitivity to the land by making it a centrepiece in her writing so

that her attempt to find a 'voice' for Africa also finds a place; it also participates in the larger South African notion that 'place' has a symbolic function.

The former characteristic is observed in the evocative description of land in her earlier novels up to *A Guest of Honour*. On many occasions 'exotic' Africa is revived with a Lawrentian sensory response to the land keeping the "Otherness" of Africa, also, intact in the narratives. But as Gordimer becomes increasingly involved in her identification with the land, we notice a shift in the narrative from *A Sport of Nature* which points to the impact of the ideological in the symbolical representation of the land. For a time landscape evocation is sidelined for political commitment as we see that her later protagonists, such as Hillela, embrace total integration with Africa for the redemption of political ills.

However, Gordimer is not happy to remain a symbolic writer with political ideologies; her personal response surfaces so markedly in her narratives that we should accept what she has said, namely that her "private preoccupation remains, running strongly beneath or alongside or intertwined with the influence of the political situation,"²² which explains her romantic struggling with reality. Nowhere else is this struggle so candidly expressed as in her landscapes. The realism is often powerful, so much an affirmation of a new South Africa, that a temptation occurs to categorise Gordimer simply as a post-colonialist. Yet the tone is delicate and subtle, and we can identify a quality of confidence in her writing which results from her integration of the colonial, the metropolitan, and the local, and which gives her work part of its basic strength.

Gordimer's ability to capture the texture of the landscapes around her and to describe telling details of place has been recognised by critics from early on in her literary career. In the "pellucid precision of her observation and description",²³ which some hostile critics refer to as "poetic exhibitionism",²⁴ we find an innate romanticism which Gordimer claims is a personal struggling with reality. This reality as we know is her colonial heritage and the incessant struggle within her to repudiate it so as to belong to Africa. While hoping and working for integration, however, Gordimer remained caught in those colonial contexts and created residual stereotypes like exoticism and pastoralism.

If a white writer from South Africa who attempted to transcend colonialism could not lay its ghost to rest, how does Desai adjust to the impact of colonialism and to the orthodox Indian set-up which prompted Spivak to refer to India as a doubly colonised society? This is our next topic for discussion in this chapter.

Fissured India

Unlike Gordimer, who created a myth of the land in order to discover and define a genuine psychic attachment to her 'beloved country', Desai throughout has a strong sense of place and the sensibility of a writer who belongs to a home. There is certainly psychological harmony with any setting she chooses to work on, be it Delhi, Calcutta, Mirpore or Manori; and her descriptions of landscapes are not mere sketchy outlines of the regions which read like traveller's guide-books. Nor is there in Desai's fiction anything of the insecurity of the exiled or transplanted colonial with an ambiguous identity who has to invent a mythology for the settings of her fiction or for herself to explain her status. Yet, in spite of such a home-grown status, Desai's landscapes appear like ill-defined regions of failure that

project perpetual confusion and dehumanisation. The settings are chiefly small societies which foster narrow outlooks on life and suggest that no corner is free from life's violations. In such landscapes and environments characters are prone to suffer from alienation, isolation, despair and decay. They lack the sense of possessing those permanent landscapes - as though in 'exile' - and find themselves, for example, among lifeless ruins, which, as some writers have pointed out, is the deep fissured temper of contemporary India.²⁵ To project this image of modern India, her accounts of a not so famous city, Mirpore, and the bustling metropolitan port city of Bengal, Calcutta, are worth considering.

Calcutta's pandemonium

In Voices in the City (1965), Desai's second novel, Calcutta is an easily identifiable metropolis with its familiar landmarks and characteristics - the Howrah bridge on the Hoogly, the swarming crowds, the thundering trams, the hubbub of commerce, the small painted boats paddled by lungi-clad fishermen, and coffee houses – “notorious gathering place(s) of the dangerous literates of Bengal” (10). Like this vast city, Desai's canvas is large, the detail full and the narrative rich, giving the reader a sense of identification with the place.²⁶ But, it is not a positive sense of identification that we find here; the text drives us to disillusionment, failure and frustration. Apart from these distinct points, the individual characters in this highly symbolic novel present the baffling problem of not being able to belong in a spiritual sense to the place as a physical entity.

As a short-term Calcutta resident, Desai might have inherited something of the nihilistic view the characters exhibit. In contemporary Calcutta she finds no primeval force or poetic colour that might bring psychic attachment to the place because, to quote one of the characters in *Voices in the City*, it is a “weary, corrupt and rapacious commercial city”(17). The place's bewildering variety of sights and sounds generate an environment of chaos and

confusion that threatens the integrity of its citizens. Take, for instance, the scene on the railway platform described in the introductory paragraph of the novel:

The train began to pant, as though in preparation for a battle, sending jets of white steam violently into the sky, and on the platform people loitered in various attitudes of nervousness, impatience and regret, turning now and then to the lights at the head of the platform, waiting for them to change. No one ever betrayed reluctance for them to do so – except, perhaps, the latecomers pounding along with baggage wobbling and disintegrating in the seemingly hopeless search for the right carriage (5).

The landscape recorded in the novel is in much the same vein. It can be taken as a wry fictional exposé of post-independent Calcutta. The tone is one of condensed hopeless nervousness. The main character, Nirode, as he walks into the city finds it a “coagulated blaze of light and sound and odour”(7). The vehicles on Howrah “roar and rattle”; “trams crash murderously past him, handcarts roll recklessly, maniacally by”(7). Such a city landscape adds feelings of non-assimilation to a sense of loss of identity in the characters. Thoughts about existential problems replace creative thoughts. Sanity becomes less and less achievable. No wonder, almost like a maniac, and in a Camusesque pattern, at the young age of 24, Nirode concludes that “life is unfair” and it is “no actual journey but a nightmare in which one is unable to start” (10). Dispirited and thoroughly overcome by the fatigue and fear that Calcutta has inflicted on him, he says: “Happiness, suffering - I want to be done with them, see beyond them to the very end” (40).

His sister Monisha's attitude is similar: “Accept...accept defeat, accept insignificance, accept solitude, a truer gift than any communication, any art, any faith or delusion in the world can offer you”(128). In the perpetual din of Calcutta she utters a 'maniac recitation' that gives her no relief:

...There is no escape from it. It surrounds this entire house, imbues it and drowns it. I lie on my bed and resign myself to it. I find my lips moving in keeping with it. It has become my own language (113).

For her artist sister Amla, who is usually cheerful and hopeful, Calcutta is a "monster city" which does not live a "normal, healthy and red-blooded life" but rather prefers a life which is "subterranean, underlit, stealthy and odorous of mortality"(150). She resents the city's enchanting or disenchanting influence on Nirode and Monisha. She meets Nirode but finds the city to be a barrier. "This city, this city of yours, it conspires against all of us who wish to enjoy it, doesn't it?" (153). Amla also seems to accept darkness as the true colour of Calcutta and realises painfully that her own role in the city is that of an 'observer' rather than a real participant. Although the words "dark", "underlit", and "barrier" suitably symbolise Amla's mood for having been transplanted to Calcutta from Bombay, the description of the chaotic city seen in diverse images and metaphors emphasises her tenuous relationship with this place. In short, Calcutta's urban cultural encroachment shows a devastating effect. It infuses fear in its residents with its 'underlit' activities. It distances brother and sister; reduces its people to an undignified and meaningless existence. Despair has become a way of life and displacement a perennial condition. Like Monisha, possessed by a kind of cyclic nervous detachment, Nirode tells Amla: "... aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring" (24).

The price of such over-indulgent detachment is abandonment by the city which forces Nirode to opt for a suicide attempt and Monisha to commit actual suicide. The stream-of-conscious narration that Desai uses successfully seduces us into total identification with Nirode and Monisha and also succeeds in making Calcutta one great invisible Presence in the novel. In fact, the winding lanes of Calcutta and its suburbs, "odorous of mortality"(8), are seldom absent from our consciousness. In an interview with RK Srivastva, Desai has admitted that she was moved to write *Voices in the City* by "the powerful impression it [Calcutta] created on me", and added

that neither Nirode nor Monisha nor Amla nor anyone else could “escape from their dilemmas.”²⁷

We may take Desai's all-consuming focus on life's dilemmas as a personal response because the city, when seen on a large and alarming scale, as the characters see it, is like a fortress that does not allow its inhabitants a chance to escape but keeps them 'questing'. In other words, the urban consciousness that the city imposes on an individual consciousness, which is one of entrapment and disillusionment, is to be seen in this context. Except for David (Irish by birth, but who has adopted India as his home) most feel displaced in their own land. (Interestingly, they do not often dream of another land, unlike Gordimer's characters who often imagine that their real 'home' is in England.) Characters here face the special problem of identity and adjustment, to borrow the words of one of Naipaul's characters in *An Area of Darkness* who suffers from an urban identity crisis: "unable to cope with the new urban forms whose spirit eludes (him)"(212). The irony of this situation in Desai's realistic novel emerges not from the exposure of moral aberrations that forces her characters to attempt suicide but from psychic stagnation and the omissions of concepts of entrapment.

It is important for us to realise that this notion of displacement in *Voices in the City* comes as much from the created and fictive life of the novel as from the material from which it is drawn. It is also important to appreciate that this is Nirode's perspective, and hence almost certainly Desai's. For her the gravest corruption of the land is its inhabitants' acquiescence in the "repetitive sterility of the past"(81), which Nirode describes as "a beauty sleep of neglect, ignorance and delay"(81). He contends that Calcuttans cherish the "glimmer-glamour" of the "drugged past", that old world India which is now in ruins and adds to the death of creativity. He says:

I suppose it's a result of so many centuries of slavery to foreign rule – we've always been a conquered race, and I can't see us getting on on our own... I sometimes feel we are just letting things go deliberately, waiting for the next conquering race to sweep in and put things right for us (81).

So thoroughly has colonialism violated the consciousness of the people that they are unable to build an instinctive bond with the land and instead find it "barrier-like"(81). Lacking in the creative urge for self-perfection - more psychological than political and economic - they see themselves as having failed. Therefore, instead of a sense of continuity and openness with the land, they experience fear and insecurity. Since their feelings are those of entrapment and displacement, the landscape does not vibrate like a living thing but remains static.

Thus the Bay of Bengal, the life-line of commerce and industry, is seen as "murky"(9), and the river Hoogly "choked"(9) with the remnants of an impressive past civilisation that is unable to give sustenance to its present citizens. As the psychological tension of fear and despair mounts, typical nouns and adjectives that Desai uses with regularity when describing the landscape of Calcutta are: 'dark', 'pandemonium', 'rapacious', 'turmoil', 'weary', 'corrupt', 'fatigue' 'City of Kali', and 'Goddess of destruction'. These only increase a sense of disillusionment with the city.

Something particularly interesting in Desai's landscape portrayal is that Calcutta presents itself as an imposing city instilling fear and insecurity in its people who do not want to become part of it - just as India posed a threat and challenge to the British with its Oriental 'Otherness'. Two popular colonial writers, Kipling and Forster, seem to stress this point. Kipling, the most influential interpreter of the *Raj*, in his early tales like "Bubbling Well Road" (1891) and "Little Tobrah" (1891) littered his landscapes with traps, gaps and threatening spaces that ensnare the imperial traveller and from which there is no escape. These tales were written after the 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857, which marked India as a hostile 'Other', full of sinister pits and unspeakable horrors in every corner. Mutterings and sighs emerge from the land, revealing Victorian Kipling's anxieties about the 'Other' in, for instance, the tale of "Little Tobrah". These 'orientalized' pits and traps are carried over into Forster's Marabar Hills and their "extraordinary caves" that protrude from the ground as some kind of half-buried corpse. The Marabar caves (A

Passage to India 1924) “suck” and “belch” and are full of “crush” and “stench”. Desai’s description of Calcutta is, in some ways, similar to Kipling’s and Forster’s because her characters are completely benumbed and confused at the variegated sights and sounds of the city and, therefore, look at it as the ‘Other’. Over-crowded Calcutta “rattles and thunders”, its narrow winding lanes are “underlit”, its dreadful muttering noises are terrible and unnerving. The narrative expectation of something dreadful about to occur here is established from beginning to end.²⁷ Yet such things happen only to Nirode and his family, which seems to suggest that terrible things happen to ‘misfits’ in the city and not to people in general.

It would be wrong to end this discussion by merely identifying Calcutta with corruption, din and weariness as a result of the characters’ alienation. The allusion to *Kali* modifies such a one-dimensional view and gives a tri-personality identity to Calcutta, as Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. Although readers may accept Srinivasa Iyengar’s remark that the *Kali* reference is more an imposition than an element which has organic reference to action or landscape representation,²⁸ in order to chart the flow of several characters’ attitudes to Calcutta Desai has found it an appropriate motif.

The mystique of Calcutta lies in the mystique of *Kali* herself. Monisha, in spite of her sense of alienation and aloneness, visits *Kali* Temple and prays for life preservation. Despite his claim of “step by step rock bottom failure”(16) and death, Nirode’s sojourns in the city take him to China town, New Market, Howrah Bridge and to the great Belur Math, creating an impression of a person experimenting with life. To their mother, whom the children identify with the Goddess *Kali*, Calcutta means sacrifice to *Kali*, the Goddess of destruction. This concept of sacrifice and destruction associated with *Kali* assumes shape and meaning in the doleful music of the harmonium player placed in contrast to the devotional chanting of the name of the Goddess in the procession described in section 111. The first scene refers to Monisha’s suicide - which Desai neatly causes the reader to assume is a

sacrifice to appease *Kali* - and the second to the mother's reconciliation with the rest of the family. This reconciliation may look a trifle mystical and contrived; but these events add to the 'dizzy contradictions' (read 41-42 for example) that Calcuttans experience within the city, intensifying the mystique that it has for writers, local and foreign.²⁹

This conceptualisation is aptly described in the concluding paragraph of the book, which describes Calcutta as night approaches:

They halted and stood, trembling, listening to the sounds of a procession that wound through the city at that very hour, chanting the goddess's name and beating on drums. Close about them fell silence, and they turned to look back at the big house behind the shrubs. It was unlit, it seemed uninhabited, one sleeping mass against the misty sky that was tinted a livid pink by the lights of the city burning beneath it. Then they saw a white figure step out on to the upper veranda, stand silently at the rail, and watch them (257).

The passage, in its mysticism, is close to the experience of life described in Section 1 of the book. The vast sprawling city, with its eternal confusion and chaos that create a condition of psychic incongruency, is now a towering figure watching over the characters. The thoughts of failure that once dominated the characters now turn to aspirations of hope because they do not see someone looking down sadistically upon them, but instead see "a white figure" watching them. Identification of the mother with the Goddess *Kali*, and by extension with Calcutta, achieves this remarkable change. The absolutes of nature, the sky and darkness, are no longer unfriendly. Those who aspire to more can see still further: the misty sky tinted pink by the lights of the city, the limitless enchantment the city provides for its people, the immensity of the perspectives the city opens up (256), and so on.

Mirpore's Sterility

Mirpore in Desai's *In Custody* (1984) is not like Calcutta in *Voices in the City*. It is indefinable as a particular city on the map of India - yet it is every Indian city.³⁰ Its function is to evoke an image of contemporary India. Beneath the loose lumping together of protean detail, it is really a concentrated imaging of decay, debris and desolation; detailed and heavily laden with irony.

"Although it lacked history, the town had probably existed for centuries in its most basic, most elemental form"(19). This is how the description of Mirpore begins in Chapter 2. A repetitive unchanging flow of life and stagnation seems to represent the basic characteristics of this city. The ubiquitous presence of dust emphasises its unproductivity. Further, to add to its unproductive life, "the citizens of Mirpore have no sense of history"(19). The small mosque of marble and pink sandstone, built by a nawab to commemorate his safe escape to this "obscure and thankfully forgotten town"(20) after the mutiny of 1857, is now

... so overgrown by the shacks, signboards, stalls, booth banners, debris and homeless poor of the bazaars that it would have been difficult for anyone to discern it beneath this multilayered covering. Its white marble facings had turned grey and pock-marked through urban pollution... the red sandstone of the dome had turned to the colour of filth from the smoke of open fires, the excreta of pigeons, and the ubiquitous dust of Mirpore (20).

Mirpore is, thus, a town totally spoiled by its own citizens. There is no respect for monuments, no special signs or space for them and no one remembers the mosque built by the nawab as a historical landmark or attempts to re-construct or restore it.

In other ways, too, the town is the very essence of sterility. Here is a passage that further suggests the aridity, stagnation and the underlying despair and futility that mark the town:

Lacking a river, the town had an artificial tank in which people bathed and from which they fetched water although there was no water to be seen in it, only a covering layer of bright green scum on which bits of paper, rags and flowers rested as on a solid surface. There were wells, too, in which the water was even more successfully concealed. Mirpore spared no effort to give an impression of total aridity (21).

There are other man-made sights (and sites) in Mirpore that increase man's sense of desolation. In EM Forster's *A Passage to India* Aziz asks Fielding and the British to go - "Clear out, you fellows, double quick I say" - so that India can become a nation of brothers. "India shall be a nation. No foreigner of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one!"(317).³¹ But in Mirpore, in free India, the same communal division found under the British persists: "the area around the mosque is considered the 'Muslim' area, and the rest 'the 'Hindu'"(21). Although no discernible boundaries mark one from the other, "pigs were generally kept out of the vicinity of the mosque and cows never slaughtered near a temple"(21). Even so, if once a year the Muslim festival, Moharam, and the Hindu festival, Holi, happened to coincide, communal disturbances would break out and tensions remain high for a time: "Then the dust of Mirpore rose and swirled and buried everything in sight again; the citizens of Mirpore returned to their daily struggle to breathe" (21-22).

In Desai's Mirpore there is also the fear of Muslims being swamped by the dominant Hindu group, each seeking an identity; the former romanticising the past days of glory and grand style of the nawabs, and asking for the restoration of Urdu - the language of the court - in schools and colleges so that it could be saved from being swallowed by that "vegetarian monster, Hindi"(15).

This, and other development projects such as schools, colleges, the railway station and bus depot, and its closeness to Delhi, all seem to turn Mirpore into a state of "perpetual motion"(21). However, the bustle is strangely unproductive:

...the yellow sweets were amongst the very few things that were actually manufactured here; there was no construction to speak of, except the daily one of repairing; no growth except in numbers, no making permanent what had remained through the centuries so stubbornly temporary - and it was other cities, other places that saw the fruits of all the bustle, leaving the debris and the litter behind for Mirpore(25).

This is a close-up view of Mirpore, the perspective of the disillusioned Deven, the protagonist of *In Custody*, a lecturer in Hindi in Lala Ram Lal College, who fantasises about the rich promises of Urdu poetry. He regards himself as a failure, both as a teacher and as someone who aspired to significant status in life. At thirty-five he feels old already, having spent all the "empty years"(17) waiting for a break, waiting to do something worthwhile, something "great"(17). That something 'great' comes in the form of interviewing his childhood idol and literary hero, the great living Urdu poet of Delhi - Nur Shahjehanabadi. Without entering into a detailed examination of this meeting we might examine the novel's locales which have their own symbolic connection with Nur's crumbling status and Deven's descent into the void.

The reader first meets a clutter of signboards "aged and faded"(29) pointing to a crumbling staircase which stood as a symbol of the vanishing past of a publishing house. Nur's house, a nightmarish maze for Deven's spirit, in the corner of a lane "blocked by the high wall of the gloomy green hospital"(38) matches Deven's despondent feelings. Then comes "a row of small, tightly shut wooden doors set into straight, faded walls"(38) which corresponds to the psychological state of both Deven and Nur: Deven's fear of failure and Nur's faded creativity.

Deven's fear grows heavier when he finds Nur in a semi-dark room:

Not only were the bamboo screens hanging in every doorway let down to keep out the sun that beat upon the top floor of the building most fiercely, but the walls were lined with dark green tiles that added to the shadowy gloom. The few pieces of

furniture - a single armchair with elongated arms that seemed designed for some earlier large species of man, a small gate-legged table piled with very shabby books, a revolving bookcase with more of them, several solid cushions and bolsters cast upon the cotton mats on the floor, were like objects carved out of this murkiness, heavy and palpable with gloom (40).

Although Deven tries to conquer the setting by his adulation of Nur, in the end he is driven into gloom as the interview and the recording sessions all resulted in a fiasco. Dispirited, he returns to Mirpore and faces the possibility of dismissal from his job. He who yearned for a life of "something great" now decides to settle for the security of a routine. This realisation comes to him out of his life's experience, and, in many ways, is indicative of a spiritual victory because in the end he finds peace with himself:

He walked up the path. Soon the sun would be up and blazing. The day would begin, with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them. He ran, stopping only to pull a branch of thorns from under his foot (204).

The landscape, which has been so far described as sterile, and is symbolic of the unproductive mind-set of Deven, is now perceived differently. Through the 'dust' of Mirpore he can see the blazing sun. He who evaded responsibilities is prepared to take risks for his family and for himself. He seems to have come a long way from the "antiquity of dust" of Mirpore.

Desai's writing, therefore, should be read as a psychic exploration, where the author is interested in moral and psychic geography more than she is in physical landscape. *In Custody* is often used by critics as a revealing example of where landscape and setting are interpreted for their metaphorical connection with theme and psychological states of being.³² As *In Custody* is the story of Deven battling against the environment, 'circumstances' as he often says, so the changes in his fortunes are marked by the landscape/setting around him. When these are presented in terms of his historical consciousness of Mirpore as a city of 'debris' and 'stagnation', 'withered and desolate', the terms attain a symbolic value. The narrative,

too, leaves behind the impression of a 'dead' and 'stagnant' India, similar to the 'muddle' and 'mystery' the country evoked in EM Forster's *A Passage to India*. Whereas Forster's is an alien's experience, written from the *raj* perspective, Desai writes from objective self-assessment of a place that clings to sterility. But, surprisingly, the optimistic ending of the novel that presents an image of India full of hope, courage and responsibility, exalts it from mere sentimentality to a brilliant realistic portrayal of a land willing to go for largescale transformation.

CHAPTER 5

FROM "OUTCASTE" TO EMERGING WOMAN

The aim of this chapter is to examine the emergence of the new woman, both as a concept and a reality in the fictional worlds of Desai and Gordimer. It explores the place of women in contemporary society as visualised by Gordimer and Desai. It is also an attempt to compare and evaluate these two major writers' feminist perceptions of man-woman relationship against a background of the changing social mores and attitudes prevalent in India and South Africa.

In their struggle to reach fulfilment of their creative powers, women writers have to confront the iconic presentation of the feminine, break it and reform it.¹ And if the struggle is part of the effort to decolonise, then this confrontation assumes a complexity which arises from a conflict between the hostile forces of colonialism that locate women in a certain feminine situation and the creative power of the female imagination that interrogates societal and ideological assumptions about the feminine in order to achieve full self-realisation. But whether in the case of Desai, a second generation Indian writer, or that of Gordimer from South Africa, whose writing career spans over fifty years, the presentation of identity in their literary productions situates them both firmly against restrictive social pressures. For that they worked towards establishing the necessary conditions for writing and publishing their work.

The tension between femininity and patriarchy is found in Gordimer as a "romantic struggling with reality", which includes in it the struggle of a female writer to overcome the imprint of colonialism in an otherwise patriarchal society. Similarly, while gathering the shreds of awareness of subjectivity

experienced by a colonised being and trying to reach the self-knowledge essential for creativity, Desai has remarked: "Reality is the one-tenth visible section of the iceberg that one sees above the surface of the ocean - art the remaining nine-tenths of it that lie below the surface ... Art does not merely reflect reality – it enlarges it."² Working in such complex situations, these writers, whose texts have set them apart as exceptional in their traditional but intellectually alert and progressive societies, are able to delineate social reality and to participate in a revolution of consciousness. Critics note that their themes and characters have a compelling power to arouse and disturb; their female subjects destabilise our notion of female or feminine, and dislocate given cultural and social relations. In short, critics see in their writing a transformatory dimension that accounts for much of the attraction and repulsion they provoke in the literary world.

This chapter is thus an examination of the terms of empowerment Desai and Gordimer use to give voice to the 'outcast(e) power' in their particular society. The primary focus is on their fiction. The parallel and contrastive characters presented show how women act and react to changing situations. The chapter also attempts to discuss the novels of Desai and Gordimer as documents expressing the writers' ambiguity - what Bakhtin characterises as "the internal dialogism of double voiced prose"³ - as women asserting subjective power in a traditional patriarchal set-up. The chapter, in other words, reflects the struggle these two women writers face to survive to fully-fledged maturity, confronting both the marginality of woman's experience as well as the pressures of colonialism and patriarchy.

Unlike many other Indian women authors who have written in two languages, Desai chose only one, which is English. Language has long been a controversial issue among Indian writers, with the colonial language English impossible to avoid. During and since the nationalist struggle writers have used English to vent their anger in anti-colonial politics. For the

woman writer, English served the additional purpose of circumventing the hierarchical displacement of women that a writer like Desai would probably have confronted in a traditional society such as India. Actually, Desai's words, "I did not choose English, English chose me",⁴ exhibit the consciousness of a writer who tried to break loose from the requirements of established aesthetics, that is, writing first in one's mother tongue and then in English.

The fact that Desai wrote in English suggests that she has two audiences. Her Indian audience is mostly English-educated with a westernised mentality. Her other audience is an international audience interested in Indian writing in English. While their critical perspectives are different, both audiences share common assumptions and draw similar conclusions about Desai's work. Both interpretative communities agree that her achievement is especially persuasive where it involves themes of female consciousness. Hostile critics describe her subjects as 'narrow' and 'insipid' and obsessed with fantasies of neuroticism.⁵ Friendly critics praise her as a "valuable writer who gives her readers insights into feminine consciousness."⁶ According to her defenders, both national and international, her exploration of feminine sensibility is expressed in the involvement of the female with the male Other projected through existential themes.

In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, Desai has said that her novels are an exploration of "the terror of facing, single-handed, the ferocious assault of existence."⁷ Since the protagonists in her novels who suffer the assault are female, it can be argued that this statement powerfully describes the anger, rage and rebellion of a woman struggling in a society of male prerogatives. There is also the suggestion of social oppression and inequalities of women in a patriarchal society. As such her work cannot be read either as a poetic celebration of human nature or a fictional metaphor of existential philosophy. Yet Desai's assertion that "literature should deal with enduring matters, less

temporary and less temporal than politics”,⁸ reveals an apparent clash between artistic impulse and social intention which is also evident in the dialogic, ambiguous and contradictory features of her work. For the purpose of this part of the study no particular novel is taken for investigation. Instead, broad reference will be made to her early and later novels.

Outcast(e) Power

As has been made clear, Desai's novels often reveal the theme of oppressed womanhood. Opening chapters depict the hierarchical orderings of a patriarchal family that demand a life of sacrifice, self-abnegation and a quiet nature from a woman. To this Desai brings the older theme of gender division which the woman internalises from childhood. Based on this setting Desai prepares the reader for a much later theme, the westernised project of colonialism. By implication this means that the traditionally-sanctioned girl-child brings to womanhood those perceptions of patriarchy that simultaneously teach her to accept and reject the positive qualities of progress and liberation provided to her through colonial education. Desai's female characters are thus dialogic representations that not only critique the victimisation of women in a patriarchal society, but also are figures of empowerment that can speak in protest and rejection of a restrictive psychosocial background.

A noteworthy feature in Desai's fiction is the figure of a woman longing 'with a fiercest desire' - the female as desiring subject. This is figured in the psychological longing of a neglected daughter for her father (*CTP* and *WSGS*), the marital yearning of a young wife for emotional union with her husband (*CTP* and *VC*), the ecstatic enjoyment of a mature woman with her lover (*VC* and *JTI*), and, finally, as the ecstasy of a woman seeking motherly bliss (*CTP*, *CLD* and *JTI*). The central attribute of this 'desiring' woman is

that, in order to maintain the subjective condition, and the economy of the energy she possesses, she cannot be satisfied. The plots of Desai's novels contain such stories of longing and deferments of satisfaction that turn them into dramas of desire, and the female protagonist becomes the representation of desire.

Curiously, Desai's disillusioned adult woman seeks her childhood home to resolve the contradictions in the traditional woman's role of a wife. The home is dominated by maternal figures and men who take the place of women in the absence of matronly ladies. The girl-child falls under the influence of these women and men and enjoys "a life that has as much room for love and for pleasure as for order and discipline" (CTP 46). The home is also seen as the trope of proud and loving freedom, a condition that raises her to assert herself when crises arise in her matrimonial life.

While home represents one pole of female empowerment it is also perceived as limited in what it can offer to a girl-child. In *Cry the Peacock*, for example, Desai shows in detail the pain and suffering of a girl in the absence of a mother. The emotional void she experiences as a child she takes into married life and this ultimately leads to the tragic step of suicide. Monisha in *Voices in the City* is another example of a woman brought up in a house that has fallen apart in the absence of a strong female figure. Since the source of identity is in 'voidness', 'isolation', a situation 'behind barred windows', 'half-darkrooms', the adult Monisha cannot resurrect herself - although she seems to be aware of the cause of her fallen identity:

I think of generations of (Bengali) women hidden behind the barred windows of half darkrooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough, and murmuring aloud verses from the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana*... Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city (120).

Yet, even as the novel narrates the sordid reality of a bad marriage, the predicament of generations of meek and submissive women, who are constantly the same, including Monisha herself, home resonates as a representation of love and pride in the background.

Similarly, foregrounding the sources of her protagonists' feminism, Desai brings into the narrative an active engagement with Indian cultural elements that valorize female power. The strongest symbol of this energy is *Kali*, the most feared deity in the Indian pantheon, to whom powers of destruction and death are attributed. Significantly, the goddess is referred to in several of Desai's novels and in *Voices in the City* she gets her fullest portrayal, probably because Calcutta (originally *Kalighat*), which takes its name from her, is the backdrop for the novel. Describing *Kali*, Nirode says, "She is everything we have fought for. She is our consciousness and our unconsciousness, she is all that is manifest and all that is unmanifest..."(237).

What is constituted in this "consciousness" is an emphasis on the communal 'we' that gives explicit recognition to a collective 'primeval truth' not only associated with the subdued aspects of womanhood, and the unfulfilled forces of female passion, but also to the idea that *Kali* is capable of transcending gender identity since these words, we know, come from Nirode. Paradoxically, she represents a collective identity of good and evil. Thus she is called the "demon goddess". She represents, we are told, those forces of female empowerment that win appreciation and respect: the *Kali* dancer "... sang songs that touched in every line, on love, on wine, on roses and on death. Her spectators shook their heads in an excess of understanding and, every now and then, uttered a cry of appreciation, of agreement" (237). The *Kali* figure appears again in *Voices in the City* to represent that powerful force of raw passion that can protect the female against the enemies who have betrayed her: "This woman had slit throats

and drained blood into her cupped hands”(237). *Kali*, therefore, represents the repressed energies of the female psyche whose release transcends social hierarchy and even gender. This mythic power is capable of both protection and destruction, hence men and women perform *Kali* worship.

In addition, Desai's female protagonists, like the iconic representation of *Kali*, are fearfully empowered with proud womanhood which gives them the ability to adjust with dignity to changing social mores and attitudes, as Maya, Monisha, Sita, Sheela and Uma do. And the narrative of patriarchal marriage takes place against this background of powerful womanhood: Maya married off to a “father figure” to satisfy her father's ego; Monisha to a “boring nonentity”; Sita to a money-minded businessman so that through marriage her parents can be free from the burden and responsibility of an adolescent girl.

We see that, as married women, Desai's protagonists become victims of disregard and indifference from their husbands. They acknowledge powerlessness and emotional vulnerability as patriarchally constructed women. Yet they do not see exile or separation as a solution to their problems. Often we notice that the narrative locates instances of insight, which permit women to move beyond passivity to a more integrated existence. When faced with the insane idea of the prophecy of death - a conventionally structured Brahmin notion that prophecies are bound to come true - Maya attempts *detachment* (as offered in the religious text *Gita*) from the everyday realities of life in order to arrive at equanimity; Monisha, before bowing down to tradition, advises her sister, “Amla always go in the opposite direction”(VC 199) and asks her to guard against being used as prey and as a sexual object. Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, protests but does not go on to break her relationship with Raman. There is a momentary self-exile in her life but she returns to the mainstream. As Desai says, “when she realises what she has to do, she has to compromise.”⁹ Compromise is

very significant for Desai, but certainly not at the cost of dignity. She aims for synthesis, not severance or divorce:

I don't think anybody's exile from society can solve any problem. I think, basically the problem is how to exist in society and yet maintain one's individuality rather than suffering from a lack of society and a lack of belonging...¹⁰

Desai strives for a harmonious and individualistic existence within the family matrix. The women in her fictional world, most of them married, understand that the characteristics of men and women are transpositional. They strongly protest but do not break away because they see no polarity between them. This comes from faith in the androgynous concept that is part of the Indian ethos and that helps Desai in moulding her protagonists.

From time to time Desai's women claim man-ordained status to assert equality but that does not remain the ultimate goal. In a paradoxically progressive movement, her female protagonists seek the realm of femaleness itself from which to draw strength. Perhaps it is in the light of this that her men, despite acting superior and indifferent, do not always treat women with contempt. They are able to admire secretly the woman's ability to adjust and her indomitable courage in facing diverse odds in life.¹¹ What is predominant in Desai's woman is the desire to harmonise her roles as an individual, wife and mother because she aims not for acceptance but for existence with all its divergent connotations.

This representation of the emerging woman who creates space and status for herself through religious figures, home, and the female force within her - the *Sakti* element that the woman should reckon with - signifies the duality of power and vulnerability which a woman faces in the existing reality available to her. She somehow establishes her strength and willpower, like Bim who calls herself "the soil... the earth" (*CLD* 182), and it is assumed without criticism that maternity in Desai's fiction signifies not nurture and sacrifice

but female power, resilience and self-growth. The Mother in *Journey to Ithaca* is such a figure of strength and resilience. Looking at this from a feminist viewpoint, one wonders at the narrowness implied in the ambiguous empowerment of Mother as a spiritual head, aloof and segregated from the arena of mainstream public life. But here is a Mother who deconstructs and transforms the existing reality to go beyond the male-allotted areas into the realm of true equality to reflect better Julia Kristeva's contention that women "are one half the sky" (1986: 202).¹²

It is clear, then, that Desai's women are "dialogic representations of double-voicedness", a feature which draws "its energy, its dialogised ambiguity, not from individual dissonances" but from what the critic Harrex has termed "cultural dissonances" existing specifically in diverse ethno-religious postcolonial India.¹³ They are increasingly aware of the dynamics of ambiguity and hybridity in colonial and post-colonial cultures. This enables the new woman in Desai's fictional world to summon up the courage to spell out inequality, violation, bondage and mutilation, arriving in many instances at 'consciousness' and 'leap(s) of recognition' in their attempts at self-criticism, as in the case of Sita, Bim and Uma. As married women they struggle to get out of the manacles that bind them; to evolve from being mere nonentity victims into vibrant individuals capable of breaking the chains without breaking the relationship. From Maya and Monisha to Sita and Uma a development is discernible from a sense of incompleteness and paranoia to self-awareness and self-poise, compromise and harmony, within the family matrix. In the context of contemporary India, 'compromise' works and there is no need to create new versions of womanhood.

Emerging Woman

Gordimer has at various times described the extraordinary difficulty that a white writer may have in transcending what the critic TT Moyana calls "one-

eyed literature," a literature that views the world with (in her case, white) racial prejudice.¹⁴ "We actually see blacks differently, which includes *not seeing*,"¹⁵ she has said, speaking for whites, and proceeds in her fiction to present quite explicitly the perspective of a white South African who has developed the "eyes the colour of the lining of black mussel shells" (*BD* 308). Throughout her fiction and other writings, her major effort seems to be towards freeing white consciousness from the colonial strictures that trap whites into roles of capitalist exploiters, landlords and employers, whether male or female, and in some way, according to her, appearing to be "perpetrators of apartheid,"¹⁶ that final and inhuman entrenchment of colonialism, "the ugliest creation of man".¹⁷

Gordimer has repeatedly been referred to as a writer who "responds with immediacy to important social and historical developments" and who constructs "fictional types... representative of social and historical movements."¹⁸ In the Introduction to her *Selected Stories* she refers to the historical sense that the stories illuminate: "The change in social attitudes unconsciously reflected in the stories represents both that of the people in society - that is to say, history - and my apprehension of it; in the writing I am acting upon my society, and in the manner of my apprehension, all the time history is acting upon me."¹⁹ On another occasion she said that had she lived elsewhere, meaning other than South Africa, her works would have reflected "particular trends in society, particular problems that would affect people's lives".²⁰ All these statements are intended to show that Gordimer's literary attempts are geared towards an historical line, providing a critique of the psychological and sociological repressions implied by colonialism and also an exploration of the relation between the private and political self in a country with legislation and social habits that continually impinge on the sense of individual privacy.

Yet, in spite of Gordimer's relation to the current socio-political climate, she has been reluctant to think of herself as a feminist writer. She has made numerous anti-feminist comments and has labelled feminism as "piffling",²¹ thereby irritating feminists and feminist critics alike. Lockett suggests indeed that Gordimer demonstrates "a strong identification with patriarchy."²² Gordimer responds to this comment by claiming that she is simply "a writer who happens to be a woman."²³ Underpinning this assertion is her later statement that "all writers are androgynous beings,"²⁴ a belief she articulates repeatedly because of her firm stance as an artist.

In spite of her hostile comments on feminism and the assertion that "the woman issue withers"²⁵ against race and class oppression in a South African context, she has made statements that suggest sympathy for feminism. For example, she laments that women are widely regarded as "honorary children",²⁶ and in an interview with Stephen Gray, she has said: "Well speaking for myself as a woman and a citizen, I've become much more radical in my outlook."²⁷ There is certainly an acute awareness of the condition of women - black and white - in her work: her women characters are troubled not only by their moral position as citizens in a racist country but also by their status as women in such a political ambience.

Before continuing this discussion, perhaps it would be useful to digress briefly and discuss some factors which might enable us to understand Gordimer's ambivalent responses to feminist imperatives in her adult life. She grew up in an intensely conservative colonial society that was sexist in its gender attitudes. In an autobiographical piece written in 1963 she wrote that her adolescence had been typically marked by opposing pulls: to conform to the social values and the instinctive urge to rebel against the expectations of community.²⁹ Both pressures she confronted with the timidity and dexterity expected of her generation and achieved, as she claims, a measure of "keeping alive in her(self)".³⁰ "Rapunzel hair is the right

metaphor for this femininity: by means of this I was able to let myself out and live in the body, with others, as well as – alone - in the mind.”³¹ The reference to Rapunzel hair is highly suggestive in the sense that it not only presented itself to her as a means of integration with the outer world but also offered her a site for rebellion and an avenue to escape stultifying familial and social pressures. Throughout her novels, Gordimer’s female protagonists seek both to integrate themselves through sexuality and through the expression of their femininity to create an integrated self.

Of Gordimer’s thirteen published novels, the five that are discussed have female protagonists: *The Lying Days*, *Burger’s Daughter*, *A Sport of Nature*, *July’s People*, and *My Son’s Story*. In addition, these novels show a marked emphasis on female perspectives. The narrative voice is female in the first two, the centre of consciousness is female in the next two, and the novel of the nineties, *My Son’s Story*, celebrates female heroism. The protagonists are ideologically committed and have strong political convictions, though these often stand in conflict with their personal needs and their place in the family. For critical and comparative convenience the first three novels mentioned are treated as one unit while the last two are taken up for independent discussion.

Helen Shaw in *The Lying Days* achieves political awareness and sophistication through a series of relationships each of which marks a stage of growth, a growth by which she moves from complete dependence to complete independence. The book constitutes, in effect, Helen’s quest for self-education for political awareness and wholeness as a woman, a quest that for Rosa in *Burger’s Daughter* involves a trip overseas, and which for Hillela in *A Sport of Nature* will involve the international arena. Both Helen and Rosa are in their twenties when their stories end while Hillela is a middle-aged mother and widow at the close of the novel. Helen is leaving South Africa while Rosa and Hillela are returning to it. Helen “wither(s) into

the truth”(TLD 341) as Rosa does after her and realises that she can only become independent of her parents by acknowledging their presence in her. Similarly, when the narrator asserts in the concluding sequence of *A Sport of Nature* “Trust Hillela, she chose well”(331), the assumption is that Gordimer’s conception of woman’s options in society is fundamentally conservative.³²

So, Helen respects conservative values and accepts them as an “unkillable fibre” (TLD 109), but it is opposition to these values that drives her to build her sense of identity and her capacity for tolerance. For instance, she quarrels bitterly with her parents over social and racial issues while staying in their house. In contrast, Rosa Burger learns political awareness early in her life through the influence of her activist parents. When her intellectual and emotional needs are at risk because of undue political commitment thrust upon her by her parents, she resists to the point of conflict and leaves South Africa.

But the conflict is resolved within a space of ten months. During her stay in France, in the midst of pleasure, leisure, and freedom, Rosa achieves new certainties, not those handed to her by her father, but her own. She acknowledges that decay and death are unavoidable and recognises that life as a Frenchman’s mistress in France would be “un paradis invente,” like a Bonnard landscape of the unicorn tapestry she sees at Cluny (BD 340). She understands that her father’s achievement could not be laid at her feet without her own continued independent action. Moreover, she sees that only by accepting that in herself which derives from her father can she act as a fully free person. Goaded by these truths, Rosa returns to South Africa, determined to prove each day over again that she wants to live like a human being.

Clearly, Gordimer's women become politically involved during the course of her fiction: Helen and Rosa against apartheid; Hillela for political redemption; Maureen, an admirer of Castro, "the bourgeois white who succeeds in turning revolutionary" (*JP* 37). Whether these women are politicised in feminist terms is debatable: there are no self-defined feminists as heroines in Gordimer's novels. Nevertheless, these women show increasing independence, self-sufficiency and political awareness within their marriage or while they are in the company of their male partners. In fact their idea of living the "serious life" that "intelligent women should naturally live" (*OFL* 282) is through a relationship with men. Although such relationships are anti-feminist and endorse compromise, they suggest that bodily beauty is important as a concept and a device for any meaningful growth.

Gordimer's portrayal of Hillela in *Sport of Nature* is an interesting case where sexuality is used for political and social power. Hillela achieves money, status and power via her 'looks'. A heroine is only a heroine if she is courageous and politically engaged *and* sensuous and desirable.³³ However, we should not assume that Gordimer sanctions female power only through looks: given the underlying commitment in the novels to a clearly defined moral agenda, deviations from the bourgeois rules of behaviour are permitted only when they advance the cause of political liberation from various forms of oppression. Instead, sexual liberation is made to look symbolic of the possibility of a more general political and wider liberation. Helen's unconsummated relationship with the Jew, Joel Aaron, Hillela's marriage to Reuel, and Elizabeth van den Sandt and Maureen's attraction to Luke Fokase and July respectively, are instances of attempts to escape from 'the prison house of whiteness' that epitomise the ethical convictions of those around them. The emphasis is on the complex personal dramas, which the novels largely concentrate on; in no way do they commit to sexual liberation or to explicit 'feminist' goals.

There are other occasions where Gordimer shows a deep and explicit interest in women who are trapped in their own marginalised settings, thus naturally allying with the dispossessed peoples who quest for a voice and for power. Hence the concern for escape and the desire for power, both in their own way offering a solution to the dilemma of marginalisation. Helen and Rosa escape isolation but come back to assimilate with the existing status quo.

In sharp contrast is Maureen in *July's People*. She escapes to the unknown at the end of the book, neither wanting to be with Bam nor to become part of 'July's People', thus reducing the novel to a problematic inconclusiveness, which in turn causes its political agenda and feminist perspective to collapse into confusion. But how are we to read the conclusion? We might read it as a suicide run into the arms of the enemy, which is ironically intended to liberate her from the unbearable unemotional isolation and alienation she suffered with her family in the village. It could be read, on the other hand, as an affirmative action, a gesture that represents an attempt to take control of both herself and her destiny, as she

[Trusts] herself with all the suppressed trust of a life time, alert, like a solitary animal at the season when the animals neither seek a mate nor to take care of young, existing only for their lone survival, the enemy that would make claims of responsibility (160).

Here Maureen breaks the cycle of fear and helplessness by confronting that which is feared. The helicopter may contain friend or foe, but it points to some kind of desired redemption for Maureen, which is suggested by the baptismal imagery of her wading in waist-deep water unmindful of the dangers posed by unseen rocks underfoot. In the dense imagery of the concluding paragraph of *July's People* she emerges 'born again', thus probably suggesting a willingness to contemplate the idea that crossing boundaries is a prerequisite for any meaningful growth.

Moving on to another group of women, there are moments in Gordimer's work where authorial exposure, and critique, of sexual oppression are explicitly clear. Often in the presentation of these women there is an impression of what Gordimer perceives as female strength, such as in her treatment of the courageous wife/mother/activist/prisoner figure of Aila in *My Son's Story*. She attempts in this novel to foreground female resourcefulness, thereby, responding positively to feminist criticism, and implicitly recognising the recent move towards the importance of female contributions to 'the struggle'.

Despite the dominant male first person narrative, Aila is shown as capable of outdoing her men at every level in her quiet embrace of the emancipation struggle, both emotional and political. Unassumingly, she overtakes the faltering efforts of Sonny (ambushed and eventually made politically impotent), and proves herself to be finally more powerful and effective than her husband. The reason, Gordimer suggests, is that, as a mother, Aila possesses a more urgent intuitive grasp of the world into which she will send her children, where the private and the political are indissolubly intertwined, and must be addressed as one.³⁴

The novel, therefore, offers a series of contrasts by which women are shown to be resilient and resourceful: whereas Sonny talks, Aila acts; whereas Sonny lives obsessed with Hannah, first Aila and then Hannah free themselves of needing Sonny; whereas Sonny and Will stay behind, Aila, Hannah and Baby move into the wider arena of the struggle in exile. The novel, indeed, celebrates female heroism, like *Burger's Daughter* and *A Sport of Nature* before it, where the political and instinctual are ideally combined to give a new sense to female strength. But the difference in *My Son's Story* is that, despite its conceptually idealised version of heroism, there is a compromise on the part of the author to enter into the female consciousness. Hence Gordimer's presentation of female characters is

somewhat like what she writes about Hannah: "feminist(s) careful of genders" (MSS 88).

It is obvious then that Gordimer's women cannot be neatly accommodated under a feminist or an anti-feminist label. Some of her women move away from sexist stereotypes and assumptions. Others, even in her recent works, retain an uncritical relationship with sexist ideology.³⁵ Her statement that she has become "more radical... as a woman"³⁶ is underpinned unevenly in her fiction, leaving us thinking that her women cannot be interpreted by any single interpretative reading.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: LIVING IN HOPE AND HISTORY

Our earliest, deepest experiences comprise the shaping we undergo because of where we live and those among whom we live – family, home, community and society. These obvious and ever-present facts also cover experiences concealed below the layers of surface appearance. Among them for many, historically, is colonialism, rule and domination by an alien minority asserting racial and economic superiority over a materially inferior native majority.

If one takes a leftward inclined definition of colonialism it is “nothing but evil”: military and economic enslavement of any dependent country accompanied by brutal exploitation and even extermination of indigenous populations and culture. Over the past decades historians, sociologists and culture-critics have studied the links between different kinds of oppression in society and literature to establish how they are expressed in a society which had a history of colonialism. They have shown that this experience, even the ‘private’ experience of people, interlocks with society’s broader colonial-patriarchal history.

Gordimer, a white South African, and Desai, a writer from India, like other writers of their time, have repeatedly probed several important issues in the social and political structures of their ‘home’ during the post-colonial period, and these are discussed in the preceding chapters. We have seen the strongly–felt need to overcome feelings of alienation and isolation caused by the burden of colonialism in both the artistic and personal spheres of their lives. That their concerns with these issues are important to them has been

demonstrated in different ways, given their strikingly dissimilar social, political and historical backgrounds, and as writers with quite different artistic views and visions. This divergence of background reminds us of the various subjective tendencies that knit together their fictional creations into a coherent 'whole', that shape their shifting themes, attitudes and perspectives, and that allow the development of a uniquely personal vision.

In Gordimer, this vision is seen in the persistent trope of a 'new type' of South Africa without racial division, tensions and deceptions. The fundamental thematic thrust of Desai's entire work, however, is for a life of freedom from the trappings of an oppressive, claustrophobic and continually repetitive home environment and from patriarchal tradition. Apart from a basic sharing of outlook – anti-colonialist with social commitment sums up Gordimer, and post-colonial with anti-establishment views sums up Desai – these writers have other similarities too strong to be ignored. Both give primary importance to the depiction of effective women characters who grow in strength and influence, thus revealing the writers' commitment to a certain "subjective continuity"¹ in their vision of life.

This leads us to make a brief survey of the 'responsible commitment' that has been explored in the study. It reveals that commitment is closely linked to the notion of belonging and the quest for wholeness in these two writers who belong to two different regions with a colonial legacy. Dissimilarity in the cultural background produces a contrast in their approach to this concept. However, their identical aim of mounting challenges and resistance to the patriarchal establishment has given a specific thrust to their writing. Investigating this idea by exploring the colonial theories and historical processes behind the historical changes that produced or influenced South African and Indian writing was the essence of Chapter 1.

This notion was developed further in Chapter 2, where the first novels of Gordimer and Desai were examined to consider the distinctly varying features of colonialism and patriarchy in their respective home environments. Chapter 3, "Colonial Modernism", was a wider discussion of 'home' and contained a close look at women's role in private and public life. The aim was to prove fiction's success as a social psychology. Another dimension was covered in Chapter 4, titled "Landscape Representations", which sought to examine the extent to which descriptions of place in the novels of Gordimer and Desai reinforce a variety of their thematic concerns ranging from political projects of resettlement to sensitivity to the natural world.

Chapter 5 investigated the concept of the 'new woman' within the different cultural backgrounds of India and South Africa. An interesting finding here was the close parallel between women's empowerment and their role in nation building. Chapter 6 was an appraisal of Gordimer's and Desai's status as writers with an emphasis on re-interpreting Gordimer from the perspective of a post-apartheid society. Desai's argument that human vulnerability defines the modern condition is pursued in this chapter to mark out Desai as one of the century's significant analytical writers.

For the sake of clarity and discernment, novels were dealt with chronologically since it is the continuities of social concern that illuminate Gordimer's and Desai's best work rather than their development as writers. Short stories were excluded from consideration because it is in the novel form that these writers are seen to develop most fully their moral commitment as artists in societies which need guidance and enlightenment. In addition, Gordimer's attitude to life - "I am finding life more and more complex, and it occurs to me as something less episodic; able to be explored better in larger works"² - establishes that the nature of her achievement is to be considered in "larger works". Early in her writing

career Desai spoke of her attraction to the novel as a medium arguing that it has the power “to convey the truth far more vividly, forcefully and memorably than any number of factually correct documents, detailed histories, or excellently documented biographies.”³ Such statements encourage us to move away from a focus upon the short stories and to consider both writers’ achievement in the novels.

The reading strategy – the method of selection and analysis – has argued that both Gordimer and Desai, different as they are, have in common an uncompromising faith in the truth-telling ability of fiction. That fiction writers are social witnesses is seen here in that Gordimer and Desai resist the temptation to create characters free of their societies as they pursue individual selfhood, however challenging the journey. At the same time these writers show a tendency to romanticise and generalise - the route to self-knowledge and autonomy for them. Yet their fiction is resonant of change in times of transformation, of struggle in times of terror, while retaining the complexity and inconsistencies of our common humanity.

Commitment and freedom in these writers’ works have been made this study’s focal points. It appears that the twin impulses of commitment and freedom in the entire body of their work is represented as a dialectic of binary opposition where the writers must choose between art and reality, happiness and freedom, or, for Gordimer in particular, between the personal and the political, where “the personal doesn’t give up without a tremendous struggle.”⁴

Gordimer acknowledges this conflict as “a romantic struggle with reality”, succinctly described in Clingman’s terms as “history from inside”. We have seen this in her descriptions of place, in her characters’ rebellion against the establishment and as working within the framework of family. But Gordimer has often said that life is full of twists and turns and subtleties – “full of

strange inconsistencies, which is the only consistency.”⁵ Her simple understatement is clear: when challenged by the social milieu (history) the self alone matters (her essential gesture). Perhaps this keenly intelligent awareness of human responses, which transcends the constraints of documentary and didactic impulses, is what has made Gordimer one of the most influential of post-colonial novelists.

In Desai’s fiction, like Gordimer’s, politics remains a mere passenger in the journey through human emotions. Her works attempt “to capture the atmosphere of the mind and directly involve the reader in the flow of a particular consciousness”.⁶ In this way Desai’s attempt is unique among Indian English novelists. Carefully avoiding association with any feminist movement, she makes it clear that her concern as an artist is with individuals “facing, single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence.”⁷ She disapproves of any specific feminist orientation stating that men and women are both part of a public domain and shaped by the historical situation of their country. “Only the individual, the solitary being, is of true interest. One must be alone, silent, in order to think or contemplate or write”⁸. Such telling statements not only encourage a re-reading of Desai beyond the ‘feminist’ label often attached to female writers but also remind us of a novelist whose work seems to contain complex mental landscapes.

Reviewing *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), Desai’s latest novel, a certain commentator has said: “The destinies of Uma, Arun and their family seem as universal, as vital and familiar, as the food on our plates”⁹ thus offering a dialectic for the universality of the particular context of domestic repression.

Too often perhaps her deliberate focus on the art of ‘seeing’ a moment, an event or mood as fully as possible when put to persuasive use expends itself on the projection of the stereotypical. For example, her description of individuals suffering under patriarchal brutalities, the great sadness in the

end, and the futility of the striving in *Voices, Where Shall We Go This Summer?* and in *Fasting, Feasting* are typically Kafkaesque. But Desai's true strengths as a novelist emerge not in the recapitulation of outworn themes of human struggle, nor in the elevation of the familiar to the typical, but precisely in her ability to create with consummate precision the unique dimensions of a thoroughly individualised consciousness in all the variety and richness of its idiosyncratic and transient subtleties of mood and response, and in the creation of powerful psychological realism. Desai's fiction may be "twice born,"¹⁰ a curious mixture of Western and Indian traditions, but as for the creative imagination which has struck a balance between these two diametrically opposite traditions, it discovers its own affinities, its own directions, its own freedom.

In the final analysis, perhaps, the different views Gordimer and Desai hold on the concept of colonialism produce contrasts and similarities in their fictional world. Desai's novels do not, as a rule, condemn the West. Exceptions are MamaPapa in *Feasting and Fasting* who constantly remind their daughter of the negative influences of a convent education. Desai in general reveals a greater awareness of the fact that 'colonialism' – oppression and exploitation – is a universal evil from which there is no turning away. She is concerned about colonialism's social and cultural institutions that suppress women and violate their basic human rights. She has drawn immensely from the anti-colonial Nationalist struggle and, in particular, focuses strongly on patriarchy to depict her particular brand of 'reality'. This is modern and contemporary. It is also replete with all the ambiguities and confusions of a modern restless mind searching for meaning in life. In the process, it has undergone several transformations. One may disagree with Desai's stance on art and politics, her testimony to polarities in the inner and outer worlds – but the significant point about her writing is that it invites difference and disagreements.

In Gordimer's novels, colonialism and apartheid - that particular segment of life, which we may loosely call "the South African situation" - are treated with open scorn and derision. The scathing critical stance that she has taken in her work might be ascribed to her awareness of the manifold ways apartheid has limited and deformed her vision. In spite of such limitations, her fictional project throughout her writing career was not so much to provide "the required background reading for anyone who wants to know what it was like in South Africa", as a certain critic has pointed out,¹¹ as to record "what it really was like to live a life determined by the struggle to be free (*MSS 276*)." As a writer never content merely to write but driven by the need to question ceaselessly the nature and context of that writing, her fiction and non-fiction are her own experiences of "writing a way out" of the confines of colonialism.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: COLONIALISM

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32. Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London, Heinemann, (first published in 1975), 1981: 62.
33. See *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, Johannesburg, COSAW, 1991:58-73.
34. Bill Ashcroft, "Africa and Australia: The Post-Colonial Connection" in *Research in African Literatures*, 1989:169.
35. Toyin Falola, 1996: 347.
36. *Ibid.*, 349.
37. Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Culture Politics* (1987). Spivak describes overwriting the colonised world as "writing of a world on an uninscribed earth", referring to how imperialism works to over-write the colonised place by pointing to the example of the British soldier 'worlding' the Indian earth in order to bring that world into the world, but as the "third world". This is true of Africa and other colonised regions.
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39. Anita Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire," *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, Vol.3, 1978: 1.
40. *Ibid.*, 2.

CHAPTER 2: CLASHES AND COLLABORATIONS:

Cry the Peacock and The Lying Days

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RS Sharma considers Desai's first novel, *Cry the Peacock*, "the first step in the direction of psychological fiction in English."
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25. M Sivaramakrishna, "Ordeal of Death", *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, 1984: 27.
26. Extracted from M Sivaramakrishna's "Ordeal of Death", 1984: 28.
27. *Ibid.*, 29.
28. Anita Desai, *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1975: 37.
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31. *Ibid.*, 114.

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33. Excerpted in Katherin Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*, 1994: 7.
34. Nadine Gordimer, 'A Writer in South Africa', in *The London Magazine*, May 1965, 22.
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36. Katherin Wagner, 1994: 9.
37. Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa", *The London Magazine*, 1965: 28.
38. Christopher Heywood, *Writers and Their Work: Nadine Gordimer*, Berkshire, Profile Book, 1983: 8.
39. Nadine Gordimer, in interview with Mike Nicol, *The Weekly Mail*, Johannesburg, February 1991: 22-28.
40. Nadine Gordimer, 1995: 1.
41. Christopher Heywood, 1983: 8.
42. Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1986: 27.
43. Nadine Gordimer, "What Being a South African Means to Me", *South African Outlook*, June 1977: 88.
44. Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994: 27.

CHAPTER 3: COLONIAL MODERNITY: THE CHANGING FACE IN GORDIMER'S AND DESAI'S LATER FICTION

1. RK Srivastava (Ed.), in the Preface to *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, Ghaziabad, Vimal Prakashan, 1984:x.
2. Anita Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire", *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 3, No.1, 1978, 2.

3. Nadine Gordimer, *What Happened to 'Burger's Daughter'? or How South African Censorship Works*, (Emmentaria: Taurus, 1980), 17.
4. *Ibid.*, 16.
5. See "A Changing Face" by Bruce King, "Families in Gordimer's Later Novels" by John Cooke and "Once More into the Burrows: Nadine Gordimer's Later Short Stories" in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer* (ed.) Bruce King, London, Macmillan, 1993.
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10. Nadine Gordimer, *A World of Strangers*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962, 252.
11. Judie Newman, *Nadine Gordimer*, (Contemporary Writer's Series), London, Routledge, 1988: 38.
12. George Brock, "A Lifetime of Mining for the Truth", interview with Nadine Gordimer, *The Times*, 18 November 1983. As in *Guest of Honour*, several of her short stories of the 1960s and 1970s have their setting in independent African states: examples are, 'The African Magician' and 'The Rain Queen' set in the Congo, 'Abroad' set in Zambia, and 'Livingstone's Companions' at an unnamed locale in central Africa.
13. Stephen Clingman, 1986: 190.
14. Robert Green, 1992: 282.

15. Paul Rich, "Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction: The Novels of André Brink, Nadine Gordimer and JM Coetzee" in *Journal of African Studies* 9(1), October 1982: 54-73.
16. Bruce King, *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, London, Macmillan, 1993: 6.
17. Stephan Gray, *The Star*, Johannesburg, (November 29) 1979: 9.
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22. Nadine Gordimer, excerpted in Kader Asmal, "Book of the Week, *The Sunday Times* (March 29), 1998: 20.
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27. SM Asnani, "Desai's Theory and Practice of the Novel". He describes Desai as an imaginative contemporary of American and European modernists driven by the same aesthetic appeal. A discussion on artistic autonomy is offered in chapter 2 of this study.
28. *Ibid.*, 5-15.
29. See "The Haunted Protagonists of Anita Desai" by H Raizada; "Desai's *Games at Twilight*" by Shiv K. Kumar in *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, Ghaziabad, Vimal Prakashan, 1984, and M Solanki, *Patterns of Survival Strategies*, Delhi, Kanishka Publishing House, 1992.

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34. Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1981.
35. R Chakravarthy, "Figuring the Maternal: Freedom and Responsibility in Anita Desai's Novels", *Ariel*, Vol. 29, April 1998: 82.
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39. Bruce King, "Introduction: A Changing Face", *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, London, Macmillan, 1993:16.
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41. KR Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers, 1994:466.
42. See SM Asnani, "Desai's Theory and Practice of the Novel" and DS Maini, "Anita Desai's Novels: An Evaluation" in *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, Ghaziabad, Vimal Prakashan, 1984.
43. The phrase is used by Bruce King in the Introduction to *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, London, Macmillan, 1993: 1.

CHAPTER 4: LANDSCAPE REPRESENTATIONS

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2. Nadine Gordimer "A Writer in South Africa", 1965: 28.
3. *Ibid.*, 28.
4. *Ibid.*, 28.
5. JM Coetzee *White Writing* (1988), Paul Rich, 'Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction' (1983), *Journal of South African Studies*, 1982 are two critical works on landscape study.
6. JM Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, London, New Haven, 1988: 9.
7. Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: An Introduction*, Cape Town, David Philip, 1979: 39.
8. Katherin Wagner, 1994: 172.
9. JM Coetzee, *White Writing*, 1988: See pages 1-11,36-64, 165-173.
10. *Ibid.*, 61.
11. *Ibid.*, 171.
12. *Ibid.*, 62.
13. Nadine Gordimer, "A South African Childhood", in *The New Yorker*, 1954: 129.
14. John Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1985: 120.
15. Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and Nation in South Africa", written in 1961, now included in DG Killam (ed.), *African Writers on African Writing*, 1973: 38.
16. Stephen Gray, *South African Literature: An Introduction*, Cape Town, David Philip, 1979:152-154.

17. JM Coetzee, *White Writing*, 'The Picturesque and the South African Landscape', 1988: 41.
18. *Ibid.*, 44.
19. David Ward, *Chronicles of Darkness* 1988: 118, quoted in Katherin Wagner *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*, 1994: 202.
20. Stephen Gray, *South African Literature: An Introduction* Cape Town, David Philip, 1979: 26.
21. Christopher Hope, reviewing *White Writing* (JM Coetzee, 1988), 1988:15.
22. Nadine Gordimer in "A Writer in South Africa" 1965: 24. Gordimer admits that although she began to read African writers in her early childhood, the formative influences on her development of an eye for the significance of place came from Woolf, Fitzgerald, Conrad and DH Lawrence.
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24. Anthony Woodward, "Nadine Gordimer", 1961:3, 5.
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27. RK Srivastva, "Anita Desai at Work: An Interview", *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, 1984: 221.
28. KR Srinivasa Iyengar, "The Women Novelists", *Indian Writing in English*, 1994: 462.
29. Gunter Grass, in his novel *The Flounder*, gives a mystical touch to Calcutta by describing the goddess Kali as a divine power that presides over the city's destiny. The protagonist Vasco feels that "her power destroys" and adds, "When in the mood she demolishes man's precarious structures. We are living in her era" (175).
30. Kirpal V, *Ariel*, "A Study of Anita Desai's *In Custody*", 1986:128.
31. EM Forster, *A Passage to India*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1975.

32. Salman Rushdie, "Anita Desai", *Imaginary Homelands*, London, Granta, 1991:73.

CHAPTER 5: "OUTCASTE" TO EMERGING WOMAN

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2. Anita Desai "Replies to the Questionnaire", *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies* Vol.3, No.1, 1978: 1.
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6. Charmazel Dudt, "A Sense of Disappointment: a Journey to the Self in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*", *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, 1984: 183.
7. Yashodhara Dalmia "An Interview with Anita Desai", *The Times of India*, April 29. 1979: 13. Quoted in "Introduction" to *Perspectives on Anita Desai*, ed. RK Srivastava, Vimal Prakashan, Ghaziabad, 1984, p.xxxviii. For an account of the representation of women in Indian literature, read Kirpal Vinay, *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*, Allied Publishers, 1990; Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Towards Liberation: Four Recent Novels from India*, Westerly 1983, also, Susie Tharu, and K Lalitha, eds. *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*, Vol.2. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993.
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10. *Ibid.*, 15.
11. Sunaina Singh, *The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai*, New Delhi, Creative Books, 1994: 125.
12. Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T Moi, Blackwell Oxford, 1986: 202.
13. SC Harrex, *The Fire and the Offering: The Modern Indian Novel in English*, Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1977. The book gives a comprehensive survey of modern Indian novelists, tracing themes and movements and offering a critical account of the major figures.
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15. Nadine Gordimer "Living in the Interregnum", *The New York Review*, 20 January 1983: 21.
16. Nadine Gordimer, "Relevance and Commitment" July 1979. In that paper read at a conference on The State of Art in South Africa, Cape Town July 1979, she said, "my consciousness has the same tint as my face."
17. Nadine Gordimer, 1983: 21.
18. Stephen Clingman, 1986.
19. Nadine Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, London, Penguin, 1983: 13.
20. Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa", *The London Magazine*, 1965: 21-28.
21. Nadine Gordimer, in conversation with Robert Boyers *et al*; 1984: 22-23.
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23. Nadine Gordimer (1981), quoted in Driver, 1983: 183, in *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*, Rowland Smith (ed.) G.K. Hall Boston, 1990.

24. Nadine Gordimer, "Introduction" to *Selected Stories*, 1975:11.
25. See the discussion of this issue in Dorothy Driver, "Politicisation of Women" (1983); Karen Lazar, "Feminism as Piffing?" (1990), Katherin Wagner, "Gordimer's Women" in *Re-reading Nadine Gordimer*, 1994.
26. Nadine Gordimer, "What Being a South African Means to Me", *South African Outlook*: June 88.
27. Nadine Gordimer in interview with Stephen Gray, *Contemporary Literature*, 1981:291.
28. Nadine Gordimer, "Leaving School – 11", 1963:62.
29. *Ibid.*, 1963: 62.
30. Nadine Gordimer, "Introduction" to *Selected Stories*, 1975:11.
31. *Ibid.*, 1975: 11.
32. In this novel Gordimer's emphasis is not so much on Hillela's personal independence as a woman as on her status as the 'new African', an evolutionary model of future Africa that Gordimer envisages. She is represented as conventionally feminine.
33. Karen Lazar, "Feminism as Piffing?", 1993: 217.
34. Katherin Wagner, 1994: 228.
35. Karen Lazar, 1993: 225.
36. Nadine Gordimer, "An Interview with Nadine Gordimer", Stephen Gray, *Contemporary Literature*, 1981: 291.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION: LIVING IN HOPE AND HISTORY

NOTES: *Living in Hope and History* is the title of Gordimer's latest publication, which once again reasserts her role as a critical enquirer. It is appropriate to end this study with such a defining title because it can be associated with both Desai's and Gordimer's writing.

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2. Nadine Gordimer in interview with Pat Schwartz, 1984.
3. Anita Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire", *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, Vol.3, No.1, 1978: 1.
4. Nadine Gordimer in interview with Mike Nicol, in *The Weekly Mail*, 1991.
5. Nadine Gordimer in interview with Suresh Roberts, *Sunday Independent*, September 30, 2001:18.
6. Meena Belliappa, *Anita Desai: A Study of her Fiction*, Calcutta, Writer's Workshop, 1971: 1.
7. Anita Desai, "Replies to the Questionnaire", *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*, 1978: 1.
8. *Ibid.*, 1.
9. Francine Prose, Review of Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* in *Sunday Independent*, 2000: 18.
10. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction*, London, Heinemann, 1976.
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Abbreviations

Desai:

<i>Cry The Peacock</i>	CTP
<i>Voices in the City</i>	VC
<i>Where Shall We Go this Summer?</i>	WSWGS
<i>Fire on the Mountain</i>	FM
<i>Clear Light of Day</i>	CLD
<i>In Custody</i>	IC
<i>Journey To Ithaca</i>	JTI

Gordimer:

<i>The Lying Days</i>	TLD
<i>Occasion for Loving</i>	OFL
<i>A World of Strangers</i>	AWS
<i>A Guest of Honour</i>	AGH
<i>Burger's Daughter</i>	BD
<i>A Sport of Nature</i>	ASN
<i>July's People</i>	JP
<i>My Son's Story</i>	MSS

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