

**A RETURN TO SENSES: THE HEALTHY SELF IN NADINE
GORDIMER'S WRITINGS**

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***Abstract:** The paper analyses some aspects of healthy and diseased bodies presented in Nadine Gordimer's latest writings that mark the writer's return to senses. Some of Susan Sontag's considerations on 'illness and its metaphors' are introduced in order to accentuate the significance of the healing proces in the circle of health, disease and recovery.*

***Keywords:** diseased Other, Gordimer, healthy Self, senses*

1. Introduction

The present paper considers some of Nadine Gordimer's writings that have acknowledged the end of the political novel, what Ileana Șora Dimitriu (2000:91) calls “the novel of the civil imaginary”. The South African writer has always been preoccupied with images of healthy (beautiful and erotic) bodies, considering physicality and sexuality as significant as political life. Consequently, critics have often described her prose as being “suffused with the sensuous”, especially since she declared in an interview that ‘sensuous experience’ made her become a writer in the first place (Ettin 1993:60). Her interest in the human body is expressed in all her novels and short stories. In fact, her latest volume of short stories, *Beethoven Was One-sixteenth Black*, marks her return to sense with a three-part story that analyses love

relationships from the perspective of the five senses: “sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch” (Gordimer 2007:141). It represents a new start for South African writers, including the “white quartet” (Kellas 2004) formed of J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and Breyten Breytenbach who are less interested in describing South African political and social life and more enthusiastic about exploring the mysteries of the human body. Thus, health and disease are used as tropes for a redefinition of private and public relationships and as the means to explore new issues that arise in the South African society. Health is the mark of the self, whereas disease – as the mark of outsiders – expresses the otherness of the self and provides experiences which are thoroughly depicted and analyzed in Gordimer’s latest novel *Get A Life*.

2. The Healthy Self and the Diseased Other

Healthy bodies have long been considered as beautiful and erotic and they used to oppose diseased and, hence, ugly and unappealing bodies. The numerous outbreaks of diseases during the twentieth century made scholars reconsider their theories about the beauty and ugliness of healthy bodies. Cancer and AIDS are two of the diseases that allow the body to be beautiful and erotic for some time before they manifest themselves. These diseases do not mark the body from the beginning and this is the reason why ‘beautiful’ is no longer a synonym of ‘healthy’. If the healthy Self used to rely on skin to tell the story of the Other, now “visible beauty no longer [offers] any protection” (Gilman 1995:146).

Susan Sontag (2001:26) considers that “health becomes banal, even vulgar” when discussing healthy and diseased bodies, yet Nadine Gordimer’s writings celebrate healthy and erotic bodies. Although Gordimer

starts from the presupposition that there is always a latent particle in every healthy body that may become activated and, eventually, the healthy Self transforms into an unhealthy Other. Susan Sontag (2001:3) also maintained in *Illness as Metaphor* that

illness is the night-side of life, a most onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.

However, the South African writer considers the recovery process more significant than the disease. Her characters use the ‘bad passport’, recover and return to their ordinary lives. Gordimer’s post-Apartheid novels and short stories offer a careful observation of the human body. She studies both the male and female bodies in order to provide images of physicality that need to be considered due to their significance in assembling the healthy Self. Regardless of their skin colour, women are admired by husbands (in the intimacy of their marriage), by colleagues, fellow politicians or freedom fighters – male or female – (when they decide to abandon their private lives).

Such an example is offered by Vera Stark, the main character in *None to Accompany Me*, a white woman in her sixties who resorts to sexuality in order to redefine her identity. Her life experience has taught her that she needs privacy, in spite of the fact that her work is related to the public and to other people’s lives: “she had never realized how much her [...] sense of privacy had grown” (Gordimer 1995:247). The moment she sees what her husband considers to be a masterpiece – a work of art inspired by Vera, in fact a headless torso – she realizes she has no identity beyond that of a beautiful body. She understands that her body is nothing more than

flesh, a “warm soft body” wrapped in “the sap-scent of semen” (Gordimer 1995:323). She is objectified both by her husband and by society. Finally, Vera “ends up moving alone towards the self” (Gordimer 1995:306), satisfying her “need to redefine [...], placing the burden of the self within the other” (Gordimer 1995:276). In this case, the healthy Self searches for a sexual Other to be consumed in a physical relationship and later abandoned.

The same consumption of a sexual Other is encountered in *The Pickup*. Julie and Abdu disrespect the tradition of Ramadan and have sexual intercourse during the fasting period. Although they both know the taboo, their bodies feel the desire rising “overwhelming the lassitude of hunger and the drought of thirst” (Gordimer 2001:155). After the two bodies have consumed each other, “they wash each other off themselves”, although they are aware that Abdu’s mother will sense the forbidden act from “the disturbance in the air of the house – made by his body, alone of anyone else’s” (Gordimer 2001:156). The Arab woman considers the sexual act a sin and her son’s body is “horribly changed [...] into corruption and ugliness” (Gordimer 2001:157). The sexual Other is no longer beautiful, despite its health, it shows a “distorted visage” (Gordimer 2001:158), for it has committed the sin of succumbing to temptation.

The healthy body can also be described as socially integrated, and the proof that a diseased body has been restored to its healthy condition is the welcoming of others. Nadine Gordimer’s latest novel, *Get a Life*, presents two cases of “dual citizenship” – a man diagnosed with cancer and a little girl infected with HIV – who manage to escape that ‘other place’ which is the kingdom of the sick either by defeating the disease or by obtaining acceptance to be integrated in the community of the healthy Other. Their bodies become the markers of individuals who are quarantined before they

are accepted by the healthy community. Gordimer examines the body – scarred yet cured – and seeks the answer to the question about the possibility and necessity to depict the sick body in order to render illness and health experiences tangible. The body is invested with the capacity to heal itself with the help of extreme treatment (radiation) so that it may return to normality and order may be restored.

For Paul Bannerman in *Get a Life*, the return to ordinary life as a “natural expression” (Gordimer 2005:110) is marked by the afternoons spent with his two black friends and their families. The man prefers to have children who “swarm around” and thus, he avoids privacy and meditation. Gordimer’s description of children’s games is a small-scale picture of different races interacting on the South African territory: they “race about in rivalry, covet one another’s toys, invent games, hug lovingly, tussle savagely and have to be parted” (Gordimer 2005:112).

3. Writing for the Senses

The writer’s concern with senses is at the center of Gordimer’s narrative, both in the Apartheid and post-Apartheid period. Her latest volume of short stories (*Beethoven Was One-sixteenth Black*) records her interest in the faculties of the human body, as she places a definition from the Oxford English dictionary at the beginning of each of the three parts of the story “Alternative Endings”: “The senses ‘usually reckoned as five – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch’.” (Gordimer 2007:141)

3.1 Visual and Tactile Senses

Visual stimuli elicit a response at unexpected levels. In *My Son’s Story* (published in 1990), a fresh gaze at the lover offers knowledge about art, sexuality and male attitude towards women. For the man in love, the

woman's eyelashes "catching the morning sun" reveal everything "he had puzzled over in the days of his self-education [...] as if all were always present even to the casual glance. What would he have known, without Hannah!" (Gordimer 2003a:102). In *The Pickup*, the white woman admires the Arab's "unconscious grace" and his "eyes deep as wells she would feel herself as if straining precariously to look into" and she becomes aware of the fact that love is "that unspoken knowledge they can share; that country to which they can resort" (Gordimer 2001:129-30). Every time she touches her lover's body, smells "the odour of his skin" (Gordimer 2001:148) or overcomes his silence, she recalls her experience in the desert in an attempt to understand its apparent lack of shapes and movement. The lover's silence is paralleled by the stillness of the desert. Julie dreams of taming both her lover and the desert: the first should be persuaded to settle down and renounce his status of eternal nomad, whereas the latter should become a green area. Nevertheless, both 'projects' require financial investment from her part and, regrettably, they fail to materialize. Before Abdu emigrates to the U.S.A. and Julie remains in the Arab country, she makes a final attempt to draw her lover "against her tightly, breast to chest, belly to belly, but he resists wildly and the embrace becomes a parody of the violence that has never existed between them" (Gordimer 2001:263). The sensual experience teaches her how to deal with the cultural and sexual Other and how to integrate in the community bordering the desert.

In *Get a Life*, Paul experiences the benefits of the healthy body before he undergoes surgery and radiation treatment by making love to his wife. His parents use the act of physical love to bury their fear of illness and death: "He stroked her hair, her shoulder, [...] a signal they would have to meet, kiss. [...] They made love, as Paul and his woman had buried their

fear when the judgment came by telephone, and they were not aware of their son without this resort, this brief haven from fearful solitude” (Gordimer 2005:28). The sensual experience enables the two couples to hide their anxieties and return to their ordinary lives. At the same time, it provides the opportunity to get in touch with their inner selves and, in Paul’s case, come to terms with the diseased body, although his greatest ambition is “to go back to touch and be touched” (Gordimer 2005:54).

3.2 Auditory Sense

Silence plays a significant part in the construction of Gordimer’s characters. On the one hand, there is the constructive silence of the desert or of the private act of love-making that encourages the contemplation of the beauty of nature and of the healthy bodies. On the other hand, there is the hostile silence caused by the disappearance of a community, by forcing the sick to isolate themselves and deal with the sound of “rabid cell on loose” inside their bodies (Gordimer 2005:87). If Abdu and Julie escape from the noisy family by retreating either to a room or into the desert, Paul is left “in the middle of staring emptiness, of himself” when everybody disappears from his life. When the voices of “disembodied callers” are muted, there is a “vacuum that is filled with the overwhelming furtive sounds” (Gordimer 2005:47-48). The hostile silence transforms into taboo and invites to meditation only when it is broken by words that “can be said among all that cannot” or by the sound of wild creatures that live in the garden-asylum. However, for the diseased, silence seems endless and it imposes a “confrontation with an unimaginable state of *self*” (Gordimer 2005:67). Any disease that requires an isolation of the body and is surrounded by the silence of unexpressed opinions and emotions is

more than a physical and mental state of an individual; it's a disembodiment from the historical one of his life, told from infancy, boyhood, to manhood of sexuality, intelligence and intellect. It's a state of existence outside the continuity of his life. (Gordimer 2005:67)

Silence can be broken by erotic sounds produced by healthy bodies, accompanied by music. In the short story "Some Are Born to Sweet Delight" (1991), the young South African woman who 'chases' a foreigner discovers that she is

overcome, amazed, engulfed by a sensuality she had no idea was inside her, a bounty of talent unexpected and unknown as a burst of a song would have been welling from one she knew she had no voice. (Gordimer 2003b:79)

In the story "The Second Sense", Gordimer describes the love relationship of a musical couple: the wife 'listens' to her career failure as a flutist and to her husband's success as a cellist. She hears the "low tender tones of what had become his voice, to her, the voice of the big curved instrument, its softly-buffed surface and graceful bulk held close against his body, sharing this intimacy" (Gordimer 2007:159). The cello emits sounds that move "from the sonority of an organ to the faintest stir of silences no human voice could produce" (Gordimer 2007:160).

The disharmony that she senses when her husband has an affair is also expressed by the instrument with its "low notes dragging as if the cello refused the cellist" (Gordimer 2007:166). Finally, the wife accepts her husband's affair and considers it the "experience of a different instrument to learn from" (Gordimer 2007:166).

Gordimer's return to senses and sensual experiences has been influenced by Susan Sontag's and Edward Said's writings. In his essay "Music as Gesture" (1994), Edward Said remarks that

For an audience, watching as opposed to only hearing a musical performance is very much part of the whole experience. What we see can either enhance such qualities as elegance and clarity or it can startlingly dramatize faults inherent to performance. (Said 2008:175)

Nadine Gordimer's attempt to offer her readers writings that appeal to all senses has materialized in texts that are remarkable due to their refinement, clarity and subtlety.

3.3 Olfactory Sense

Visual, tactile and auditory senses are accompanied by olfactory descriptions in Gordimer's stories. The odour emanated by the diseased body functions as a repellent for the healthy, and it does not disappear with the disease or "by contact with the bodies, with the essence of others" (Gordimer 2005:48). It remains 'undiluted', although it is "distilled by [the] days and nights" spent in the garden-asylum. Animals also refuse to share the same space with the ill: Paul's old dog twitches "its flared nose along the hospital hold-all" and prefers to keep away from the radiant body which is identified as dangerous. Paul's recovery also implies regaining the smell he has lost "scent by scent" (Gordimer 2005:51).

In "The Third Sense", two bodies engaged in the act of lovemaking know the smell of life, that is

the smell of his skin mingled with what she is, a blend of infusions from the mysterious chemistry of different activities in different parts of their bodies, giving off a flora of flesh juices, the delicacy of sweat, semen, cosmetics, saliva, salt tears: all become an odour distilled as theirs alone. (Gordimer 2007:172)

The healthy female body likes “to breathe there, into him and breathe him in, taking possession he was not conscious of and was yet the essence of them both” (Gordimer 2007:171). In *The Pickup*, the rooms faintly give “the scent of perfume and semen from an image of how it will be to make love there” (Gordimer 2001:152). The same smell of the sexual Other makes the lover aware of the absence of intimacy and hollows “him out with the deep breath it made him take, all through his body, limbs and hands” (Gordimer 2001:174).

In *My Son's Story*, smell reveals the presence of different types of people at a political rally: “A woman's French perfume and the sweat of a drunk merged as if one breath came from them. And yet it was not alarming for the whites; in fact, an old fear of closeness, of the odours and heat of other flesh, was gone. One ultimate body of bodies was inhaling and exhaling in the single diastole and systole” (Gordimer 2003a:110). In *Burger's Daughter*, “the cosmetic perfumes of the middle-class white and black ladies and the coal-smoke and vaginal odours of old poor black women” combine in order to offer the olfactory picture of a multiracial society (Gordimer 1980:204).

Gordimer's novels abound in descriptions of black bodies, always healthy and sensuous, expressions of sexuality and power in South Africa. Yet, it must be reminded that, during the Apartheid period, laws were passed to reinforce restrictions for black citizens who were considered mere bodies. The black body was treated as the diseased and infectious Other, and had to

be isolated in 'special' neighbourhoods (Soweto, for example) where it could no longer contaminate the healthy Self, which used to be the equivalent of the white body.

4. Conclusion

Numerous critics have denounced Nadine Gordimer's decision to abandon the 'grand narrative' and turn to the individual. However, her interest in the human body and sensual experiences can be found in many of her writings due to the fact that healthy bodies are Gordimer's modality to express her optimism as far as the future of South Africa is concerned.

To paraphrase Susan Sontag, we might say that the way societies perceive illness and regard the unhealthy Other is what makes illness 'the evil' of all times. Yet, "there are new beginnings, in place" (Gordimer 2005:176) and the breaking of taboos will transform the reading of the diseased body from a text that differentiates and stigmatizes into a palimpsest that may be interpreted to uncover the circle of health, illness and recovery.

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