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NADINE GORDIMER

an interview with

NADINE GORDIMER

Conducted by Nancy Topping Bazin

Nadine Gordimer says she is not a political person; yet her writings document, decade by decade, the impact of politics on personal lives and what an increasingly radical white South African woman felt, thought, and imagined during the rise and fall of apartheid. Within this political and psychological material, she seeks to capture the mystery of life. Gordimer emphasizes that Marcel Proust influenced her as an artist more than any other writer; yet many would link her name more with the techniques of social realism than with those of stream of consciousness. Still, after writing eleven novels, she chooses as her favorite her sixth, *The Conservationist*, the one that reveals most persistently the interior life of her protagonist. Thus seeming contradictions make us become aware of this artist's complexity.

Raised in the small mining town of Springs, Transvaal, intellectually Nadine Gordimer soon became an anomaly. A frequenter of the public library, she loved books and writing even as a child. Moreover, the isolation and lack of physical activity she suffered from age ten through sixteen (when withdrawn from school and dance classes because of a minor heart ailment) ensured the devotion to words that quickly gave her an extraordinary command of the English language. Gordimer's remarkable talent as a writer was recognized well before she published her first two volumes of short stories in 1949 and 1952 and her first novel, *The Lying Days*, in 1953. Subsequent international recognition included winning, among others, the Booker Prize in England, the Grand Aigle d'Or Prize in France, several CNA prizes in South Africa, the Common Wealth,

Bennett, and Modern Language Association awards in the United States and then, in 1991, the most coveted confirmation of literary success, the Nobel Prize for literature.

To date, in addition to her eleven novels, Gordimer has published eight volumes of short stories, approximately forty reviews, and more than 150 essays on the political situation in South Africa and on censorship, travel, and literature. Gordimer moves back and forth between genres. At times, for example, she has selected sections from her novels to publish as short stories or converted short stories into filmscripts. Her most important film project, intended to be a full-length Warner Brothers movie of her eighth novel, *July's People* (1981), was abandoned after a decade of rewriting the screenplay and, then, her rejection of a final version by another scriptwriter.

July's People is a pivotal novel that marks the completion of her white protagonist's shift in allegiance from the white to the black world. Before it, Gordimer's white female protagonists maintained private lives in the white world while identifying politically with the black. Implicit in the ending of *July's People* is the possibility of shifting the intimate life, as well, to the other side of the "colour bar."

In 1959 Gordimer wrote an essay entitled "Where Do Whites Fit In?" Each of her novels reveals an exploration of possible answers to that question. *A Sport of Nature* (1987) examines sexual attraction as one way to cross racial barriers. The protagonist, Hillela, marries a black revolutionary and then, after his assassination, marries another. Although Hillela gives birth to a black child, she reluctantly concludes that the time is not yet right for a "rainbow family." Whereas Hillela's political loyalties stem from her sexual commitment, ultimately Hannah's commitment in *My Son's Story* (1990) is to her own political beliefs. The black lovers in these two novels have wives who silently endure their husbands' relationships with white women. However, Sonny's seemingly submissive wife, Aila, secretly decides in his absence to take major risks for the revolutionary struggle. When Aila is arrested, the white mistress can no longer dismiss her; therefore, Hannah breaks off her affair with Sonny. In *None to Accompany Me* (1994), the black female, Sibongile, rises to political prominence just as her politically tainted husband is forced to fade into the background. The

increased power of some black women alters the nature of the white female-black male relationship, whether at a conscious or a subconscious level. Sibongile's white friend, Vera Stark, has a special but not sexual relationship with black leader Zeph Rapulana. Although Gordimer denies that Zeph's blackness is important, Vera Stark's bond with him derives from his having risked his life in a black squatters' confrontation with a white farmer. Furthermore, Vera's discarded white husband knows that, by living in an "annexe" to Zeph's house, Vera is on "the safest kind of premises, in present conditions, the property of a prominent black man [now in finance] not overtly involved in politics" (321-22). Despite this last remnant of black male protection in *None to Accompany Me*, in each of Gordimer's later novels the white woman has become more independent sexually and politically.

Nadine Gordimer scheduled her fall 1994 visit to the United States to promote *None to Accompany Me*. Because of her husband's illness, she had to shorten her visit and therefore canceled her reading at Old Dominion University as well as numerous interviews and TV appearances that would normally have accompanied the publication of her new book. She did agree, however, to grant me this telephone interview with her on October 17, 1994.

Q. I am writing a book tentatively entitled "The Self in Revolution: Politics and Sexuality in Nadine Gordimer's Novels." I am particularly interested in the interconnections between colonialism, racism, sexism, and sexuality, with the main focus on sexuality. That is the framework for the questions I would like to ask.

In 1988, you stated in an interview that "the two greatest drives in people's lives, the two most important things, are sex and politics." You have frequently discussed the political context from which your novels emerge. Would you discuss the cultural context that may have influenced your ideas on sexuality?

A. Well, that's a difficult one. First of all, I wouldn't agree that my novels have arisen from the political context. I happen to have lived in a politically charged atmosphere and milieu all my life; but I was writing long before I was aware of what politics was, so I don't really write out of motivation of politics. I began to write looking for

explanations for life. I continue to write out of my sense of the mystery of life, exploring it through my characters. But I've digressed and have not answered the other question. Would you repeat it?

Q. I'm wondering about the cultural context that influenced your ideas about sexuality. Maybe reading D. H. Lawrence? Or did you read people like Havelock Ellis, whom Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* is reading? Or was there a sexual liberation movement that might have influenced your writing?

A. No, because when I was young in the fifties, the sexual liberation movement was in its infancy, and really I wasn't aware of it at all. I think my ideas about sexual emotions and sexuality certainly came from imaginative literature. And I think Proust had a great influence on me with the idea that love, which in popular fiction is always regarded as the "happily ever after" solution, is a very difficult and often painful process full of jealousies and frustrations. In other words, it's an experience of turmoil rather than peace.

Q. In your most recent novel, *None to Accompany Me*, you refer more specifically than in the past to sexuality in relation to the self and sexuality in relation to marriage. When Vera is having her affair with Otto, she comes to regard her sexuality as "a private constant in her being, a characteristic like the colour of eyes." She says it "never could belong to anyone other than the self." And she adds, "sexuality . . . was a wholly owned attribute, could not be claimed by the naive bid." Then she lies beside her husband Ben "with a sense of pride and freedom rather than betrayal."

A. Yes, Vera was discovering something that went quite contrary to the sort of background in which she was brought up, where, in marriage, each partner belongs to the other—totally! In the very fact that one says *my wife*, *my husband*, there's the idea of ownership. And she was discovering a kind of freedom. Indeed, your sexuality cannot be owned solely by someone else because it is so much part of your character and your makeup. It is for you to dispose of and use according to your own needs; therefore, it cannot be someone else's possession. So that was the discovery Vera was making, and that was why she didn't feel guilty.

Q. That's quite a radical position, compared to the standard.

A. Yes, but of course that doesn't always work for her. Because you'll remember that somewhere else in the book—when she's passing with Otto, her lover, in the car—she sees Ben sitting alone in a restaurant. What she gets is a premonition of perhaps herself being discarded or set aside—it could happen to her in other words—and a premonition of what she works toward voluntarily in the end, and that is shedding these dependencies and relationships and returning to the self. But she sees it as a kind of desolation.

Q. Do you see any resolution to this depiction of what seems to be an irresolvable conflict between what is good for the individual (in terms of sexual freedom) and what is good for the family (the spouse and more particularly the children) in terms of stability?

A. Well, if you're asking me this just as a human being, as a woman, I certainly don't; I don't think there is a solution. There are compromises but no solutions.

Q. It's the precarious situation with which we live.

A. Yes.

Q. In several of your books you have depicted close relationships between white women and black revolutionaries. In *None to Accompany Me*, Vera has a special friendship with Zeph, a black African activist who has a postrevolutionary career in finance. While her husband is in London visiting her son, she sells the family home and moves into "the annexe of Zeph's house." As an explanation for this radical decision, she says she wants "To find out about [her] life. The truth. In the end. That's all." Vera is not lonely, and she has her work to do. Would you comment on Zeph's role in this process she is going through? How important is his loyalty? How important to the white woman is the protection of a black leader?

A. I don't think the black and white thing comes into this at all. I think it's something that goes beyond that. Zeph could have been a

white man; he could have been a woman. What I was looking at there was the narrowness of the emotional connections that we know. We are born; we are children in connection with mother and father. We grow up; we make friends; we have that other relationship. We then have lovers; we then have husbands or wives. And you can count these relationships on the fingers of one hand. We regard that as the limit of what they can be. But just as the human brain, we are told, has possibilities that we don't use at all (we only use a very small part of it), who knows what other forms of human connections and emotions there may be? What she is feeling toward, what happens to her with Zeph, is truly a new kind of relationship, a realization that you can have a very close connection with somebody—something extremely satisfying that is not mother-child, father-son, lover-husband-wife-friend. Because she is more than an ordinary friend. There's something special about their relationship; it's really not possible to define it. I think the whole thing is, she doesn't try to define it; she accepts it: it is there.

It's an irrational thing, because—if you look at his background and the way that they met—here is a man coming out of the squatter camp. But, of course, if you're looking at it in a political way, it's connected with what is quoted on the jacket of the book: that with the passing of an old regime, perhaps there is a possibility of living a new way, of discovering a new self. So that is the connection with the fact that he is a prominent black man. He's living in a way quite different from the way anybody in his world has lived before—as a businessman, an entrepreneur. And yet he comes from the heart of the struggle, living there in the squatter camp. So he is becoming someone who can answer what he sees as the demands of his time. Some people can never change. They may be wonderful in a certain situation and totally impotent in another. It is always difficult to analyze your own books, but if I try to analyze it, what Vera and Zeph have in common is that they are both moving into a different life and perhaps, with it, there can be a different kind of relationship.

Q. Why does he leave his wife behind, where he lived before? Is that because he has grown beyond her?

A. No, that would be very much a matter of circumstance—and also a matter of choice. But that background at home with her in the family and in the place they come from would be very important to him. And it's the kind of base that he goes back to and that she doesn't choose to leave; but it doesn't break their relationship. And of course it goes back a long way in terms of how black people always had to leave home if it was far away from the big city, leave the wife and go and work in town and be a sort of weekend husband or a weekend lover or whatever. So it's not anything particularly significant. It's not significant for the relationship that he has with Vera. If Vera were not there, it would still be the same. He probably doesn't like how his wife feels. She likes her own friends and her structures of her own life around her.

Q. Can you recall or imagine what you might have said to Warner Brothers producer Roland Joffe about the relationship between white women and black leaders? While you were revising the film-script of *July's People* in 1984, he wrote to you: "I was very struck by what you said about the white women and black leaders. What you had to say about survival was both optimistic and shocking." Can you recall the context of that?

A. No. It must have been somehow connected to *July's People*, but I can't see how. There was no black leader in *July's People*.

Q. In the screenplay of *July's People*, however, Maureen shifts her allegiance to the black freedom fighters.

A. Yes, but they would just be soldiers of the line so to speak. There wouldn't be leaders in that helicopter.

Q. I would also like to ask you about the children in your novels. They are frequently victims of either sexuality or politics. In my opinion, one of the most important subjects in *My Son's Story* is Will's pain about his father's affair.

A. Will is really a victim.

Q. Many of the children in your fiction have been neglected either because of sex (for example, Will and Annie and Hillela) or because of politics (for example, Rosa Burger and Baasie). Would you comment on that phenomenon?

A. Well, I can comment on it vis-à-vis politics, because to be involved as a revolutionary in politics requires a great sacrifice of family life. It's interesting to see the different ways the children of such families react. Most of them, indeed, are like Rosa Burger. It's astonishing how the tradition of a position—of getting into the struggle—went on from generation to generation in some families. I can think, for example, of one Indian South African family where, going right back to the time of Gandhi, there was a grandfather in and out of jail, there was the son, there was the grandson, and down to the great-grandchildren, one or two of whom are now members of the government. So the political tradition, the political passion seems to be passed on, and it runs counter to what people think of as the generation gap. The generation gap seems much more rarely to occur and break up relationships between political parents and their children than it does among nonpolitical people.

Q. Can you say something about Will's pain? I think critics often neglect that aspect of *My Son's Story*.

A. Yes, they neglect that aspect of the book because Will is one who doesn't follow the theory that I have just propounded. Because Will is resentful. He feels that his role has been assigned to him by his parents, and it's a minor one. Indeed, I think he says somewhere that he is expected to stay at home, keep the home fires burning while his father and mother carry on with the political struggle. And even the apparently frivolous sister turns out to be heavily involved. But nobody wants him to be, because somebody has got to keep some base for them; and he resents this. And of course that is compounded by the fact that he discovers that his adored father is having a love affair. Will's position is very complicated, because there also comes into it the age-old rivalry between males. When the son grows up and they are, so to speak, competing for the favors of women, he's jealous of the fact that his father has not stepped aside for the next generation. So Will is compounded of many sad-

nesses and resentments. But of course this makes him into something else. It apparently makes him a writer, because it turns out in the end that the account of the whole business has been written by him.

Q. Would you comment on his misogyny?

A. He isn't really a misogynist.

Q. I mean his attitude toward Hannah, the way he talks about her as a "pink pig."

A. Well, I think that comes out of jealousy. His attitude toward women is much colored by that; he distrusts them, because of the fact that this woman *he* feels seduced his father. So he has this distrust of women and almost a vengeful attitude toward them. One doesn't know whether Will would ever make some satisfactory relationship with a woman. When we leave him at the end of the book, he's still very young.

Q. It seemed to me that Toby in *A World of Strangers* was also misogynous. It's been a while since I read it, but . . .

A. Yes, it's been a long time since I read it. Toby's more of an opportunist, really. I mean, he has an affair with Cecil.

Q. Yes, but he doesn't seem to care about women at all.

A. No, no, not deeply.

Q. Prejudice against homosexuality will probably be more difficult than racism or sexism to uproot. You've created a lesbian daughter, Vera's Annie, and a gay son, Mehring's Terry, in your fiction. Are you primarily interested in the parents' reactions to their children's sexuality?

A. Well, I'm interested in Vera's because I think it's quite ironic, quite a paradox. Vera is such a liberated woman, but she's honest in the fact that the actual physical side of lesbianism is something she simply cannot imagine and cannot accept. It comes out when she

discusses it with Annie. It's simply something that as a woman in her body she cannot imagine, she cannot accept. She is essentially a lover of men; she likes men very much. She can't imagine there could be anybody who didn't want a man.

Q. I am curious about the moments in your fiction when political action is seemingly motivated by sexual attraction. Do I detect Toby's attraction to Steven [in *A World of Strangers*] to be consciously or unconsciously sexual (I don't mean homosexual in the strictest sense of that word)?

A. No.

Q. Or Rosa Burger's attraction to Marisa [in *Burger's Daughter*]?

A. No.

Q. Or Bray's attraction to Shinza [in *A Guest of Honour*]?

A. No. Shinza is really such a sexually active man; I mean, he's just acquired yet another new wife and a baby.

Q. Yes, but Bray seems attracted to the fact that Shinza is so sexual.

A. No, I don't think so.

Q. Vera remarks in *None to Accompany Me*, "The beloved is unknown at any address, a self, unlike a bed, cannot be shared, and cannot be shed." Would you explain a little more fully what you mean by the "self"?

A. Well, that connects with what we talked about before—about her sexuality, which she feels is an attribute in itself. It belongs only to her and it can't be owned by anybody else; it's connected with that. Same thought, along the same lines.

Q. In what sense exactly can it not be shared? Is it just that you can freely give it, but somebody else can't demand it from you?

A. Again, she's thinking of the concept of marriage where it's supposed to be shared with one person, belongs to that person. You belong to me; I belong to you. She feels that this is impossible. Even though at some time in her life—in the beginning when she was in love with Ben—she found it very comforting and thought that it was the beginning and the end of the problems of self.

Q. I am curious, too, about the ending of *July's People*. Maureen, like Vera, goes off on her own. Roland Joffe said at one point that Maureen's flight at the end of *July's People* seemed more an act of alienation than communion. Maureen abandons her family when she runs toward the helicopter in *July's People*.

A. Well, when I look back I see Maureen as, in a way, the last colonial woman. She has been handed from father to husband. And she has had, in effect, two husbands—though she didn't realize it—because July does so much for her. July is so protective of her, takes care of her, takes all sorts of burdens off her. This is, I think, a typically colonial attitude—that the white woman has a man who looks after her. In the classic colonial situation she wouldn't even have worked. She just would have been the graceful consort of the husband. And then there would be soft-footed servitors running around—male. So, in effect, you have two husbands there.

And then, of course, both husbands turn out not to be able to protect her anymore, because her own husband, Bam, without his car and his gun and his office, is absolutely unable to do anything for her—to protect her, or to feed her, or to do anything. And July turns out to belong to his own people, to be able to offer temporary shelter but not the kind of reverse dependency which she had hoped for. She had looked after July "in town" and now July's going to look after her there [in his village], and of course he does for a while. But I think that in a subconscious way and in the most unlikely and dangerous of circumstances, she rejects this and realizes that she's really not a person on her own. And I only understood that when I looked at the book long after I had written it, when I was looking at it with Joffe and he was thinking of making a film of it. But she goes through a form of cleansing, of baptism, when she's born again in a sense, when she goes through the river, running away.

She simply wants to make choices of her own. And of course there's a political aspect to it, because Bam wants to go back to town, which means that they would be holed up somewhere with whites defending themselves and their women.

Q. So in the novel, as in the filmscripts, the men in the helicopter are black?

A. Yes. She'd rather take a chance on blacks.

Q. Do you see connections from that novel to the most recent in terms of the search for self?

A. I think that all of us writers—I mean I've written eleven novels, very different characters if you think of somebody like Mehring, then you think of the story being told by Will, and so on, and the kind of person that our sport of nature is, Hillela—but I think that all novelists are in effect writing one book. They are looking at life and certain themes that puzzle and intrigue them, and hold them. They're looking at these themes from a different angle and from a different stage of knowledge of life, all through the working life. So that there are connections with all the books even if on the surface they seem remote.

Q. In *None to Accompany Me*, is Vera shedding not only family but also her sexuality? Her name suggests austerity—Vera Stark. Is that what is required of her?

A. I think that there's a question mark over that. Novelists don't give answers; they ask questions. Vera's getting old, so maybe she is leaving sexuality behind her. But she's had a very active sexual life, and maybe she isn't. Maybe she'll form some kind of attachment to some other man. Because obviously that side doesn't affect the relationship with Zeph. After all, at the end she walks, stumbles in the dark into the young girl who has just come from Zeph's bed. This doesn't upset her, because she doesn't have a sexual relationship with him.

Q. Does de-emphasizing sexuality here have anything to do with the politics? In *None to Accompany Me* you say that, like art, the political life is "transcendent," whereas the personal life is "transitory."

A. Well, what is meant there is that, if you look at her life, she has gone through many things, outgrown them, set them aside, discarded them, or changed her attitude toward them, but the one constant in her life has been indeed the cause—the political cause—and the new kind of life that it's about to bring. I mean, that book ends just before the elections.

Q. As you mentioned, at the end Vera goes into Zeph's house and unexpectedly bumps into a younger woman—"a warm soft body"—in the dark hallway. Vera's response to being "tenderly fused in the sap-scent of semen that came from her" is very restrained. Vera simply goes out into the garden, walks around a bit, and "then took up her way." I would like your comments on the way you presented that.

A. The very fact that she walks out, and she's rather exalted by the night sky, by the cold air—this is not the reaction of a woman who feels betrayed or depressed. She seems to feel pretty confident of herself.

Q. Did you see the encounter in the hallway as humorous?

A. No, not really. I think there are other things that are humorous, for instance, when Vera goes to visit her daughter toward the end and now the daughter and her lover have adopted a baby. This is an ironic and rather humorous exchange of roles, because Vera's just closed up her house, got rid of the domestic thing, and now here's her lesbian daughter sort of setting up a cozy home, cooing over a baby. So that amuses me rather, and probably it did her too.

Q. Are there any books on the psychology of racism or on the connections between colonialism, racism, and sexuality that have influenced you?

A. None.

Q. I'm thinking, for example, of works by Frantz Fanon, or Dominique Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban*.

A. All these things come from my own experience, from inside. Now, late in my life, obviously I can read anything, and it's too late for things to influence me. I don't need influencing anymore. But the book that I read recently that interested me tremendously was Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. It seemed to me to be a very illuminating book, you know, on the theoretical side of it.

Q. In an interview that was published in *Callaloo* in 1993, you said that in *A Sport of Nature* you were exploring "the influence of sensuality on political activism." Would you expand on that?

A. Hillela grew out of something that I had observed, had been observing for some time. The kind of people I know who are active in politics are very cerebral people. But every now and then, there is an absolute surprise because some woman enters political influence in the very old way of being the power behind the throne—by getting into the bed of the king. And people are often very scornful of such people, saying, well of course all she does is bed hop from one leader to another. And I began to think there is some kind of a role there, and such people are interesting and one shouldn't be so scornful of them. After all, Hillela provides a lot of support and comfort to people in very difficult positions. So to call her a tramp and a bit of a tart ignores that she's a very generous and life-giving person. For people who are in exile, people who are in dangerous positions, it surely means a great deal for them to find some sexual happiness and some love and tenderness in somebody. So Hillela—to me, truly a sport of nature, something very odd—was a phenomenon that interested me. And then of course I had to think about where such a person would come from, what kind of background would produce her, and that's how the novel came about.

Q. There was a hint of that with Liz in *The Late Bourgeois World*: she is attracted to Luke Fokase and, therefore, will probably take a great risk to help his cause. Or Pauline [in *A Sport of Nature*] finally takes action because she's attracted to the black man who asks her for help.

A. Yes.

Q. Which would suggest that sometimes white women take political risks for these sexual, or somewhat irrational, reasons?

A. Yes, well, I don't know whether one can generalize about that.

Q. I would also like to ask you about your creative process. I was amazed at your first drafts; you seem to draft the novel whole, almost in its final form.

A. Yes, I do.

Q. They aren't worked out in your notebooks either. Do you plan them mostly in your head?

A. Yes, those notebooks that you saw [in the Lilly Library] are all there is.

Q. That is amazing!

A. I never really take detailed notes. I would, as you saw, struggle with names, because names are very important to me. Changing people's names, crossing them in and out, and so on.

Q. Does a structure evolve as you write, or do you create all of it in your mind ahead of time?

A. No, it evolves as I write.

Q. And what about the characters, do you hear them in your mind as voices?

A. The characters also grow. In the case of *None to Accompany Me*, I would have Vera, I would have someone who was going to be Zeph. Perhaps his proper background and where he would come from and what he would be doing were not there. And of course Sibongile and Didymus, they were there. But the others, the children and so on, that just comes as it goes along.

Q. Do you have any autobiographical pieces that haven't been published yet which you might be willing to share with me?

A. No.

Q. Are there any parallels between your life and the last four novels that you would be willing to talk about?

A. Well, that I wouldn't talk about to anybody. That's entirely my private affair. Of course, my private letters are not in the archives. But the great body of correspondence—a lot of it is quite private—is there, but just a few things I have kept for myself.

Q. Do you think you would ever write an autobiography?

A. Never. I'm much too secretive.

Q. Is there a particular kind of critical study you feel should be written about your works that has not been written yet?

A. No. I honestly don't think about that.

Q. Do you have a favorite novel of yours?

A. People often ask me that, and it's very difficult because for all sorts of personal reasons, one may have a strong feeling for a novel. It may not be your best. On the other hand, one may have a different kind of strong feeling for a novel because it was something difficult and you didn't know whether you could do it, but you did. In that category, I always think of *The Conservationist*.

Q. Yes, that's a marvelous novel.

A. There I simply ignored whether people would understand the references or not. It was up to me for them to make the imaginative leap. When I had done that, I felt really I had learned something. When it came to writing the next one, which was *Burger's Daughter*, the way I wrote *The Conservationist* simply couldn't work for *Burger's Daughter*. Because there was too much factual information that had to go into it, I couldn't write it the same way. So I had to find another

way of doing that. For example the background of the father—I had to somehow convey how he became a communist, this, that, and the other. And that was something I thought about for a long time. And then the solution came to me, and that was, What happens when a man like a public figure dies? People will come to the daughter and start asking questions about the father and ask whether she has any papers or whatever. So that gave me a chance to double think, first of all, that she would begin to look into her parents' lives and provide such information and, secondly, that she would discover things about them that she didn't know. So I found the solution, but it couldn't have been written in the completely internal, impressionistic way that *The Conservationist* was written. And so it goes on.

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