

## **Madness, Mysticism, and Fantasy: Shifting Perspectives in the Novels of Doris Lessing, Bessie Head, and Nadine Gordimer**

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■ However different their lives, Doris Lessing, Bessie Head, and Nadine Gordimer share the common heritage of having grown up in southern Africa. All three were profoundly affected by that experience. Their responses to the racist attitudes that permeated their daily lives as children have determined to a major extent the kind of fiction they have written as adults. Their novels reflect the urgency of their message—that human behavior must change. These three authors employ madness, mystical experiences, and fantasy to help their readers experience more fully the nightmarish quality of the past and present as well as dystopian and utopian visions of the future. By shifting the reader's perspective from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the actual to the fantastic, these novelists seek to communicate the horror of what they have known and their longings for something else—other ways of being and acting than those that characterize not only most whites of southern Africa but also most people of all colors all over this planet.

There are degrees of madness. Group behavior imbibes a kind of madness when it is the product of racist, sexist, and class-conscious attitudes cultivated in a context of potential violence. In Doris Lessing's second novel, *Martha Quest* (1952), she demonstrates, through her descriptions of the daily sundowner parties at the Sports Club, the extent to which quite mad behavior can be socially acceptable. Martha, the protagonist, neglects her studies and her need for balanced meals and adequate sleep in order to participate in the frenzied lifestyle of her peers. The young whites spent every evening from 1935 through 1938

having a good time. Their leader was Binkie, “a carelessly generous, untidy, beer-fat young man,” whose rousing call to join in the fun was: “‘Come on, let’s-tear-it-to-pieces!’” (135–36). The young women were expected not to “giggle when this wolf or that moaned and rolled his eyes and said, ‘Beautiful, why haven’t I seen you before, I can’t take it, I’m dying,’ as he clutched his forehead and reeled back from the vision of her unbearable attractions” (137). At these parties,

Martha found herself drawn onto the veranda by one or other of the wolves (afterwards she had to remind herself who they had been) and kissed; and always in the same way. Abruptly, without any sort of preface, she was held rigid against a hard body, . . . and her head was bent back under a thrusting, teeth-bared kiss. Afterwards, he breathed heavily, like a runner, and sighed, and said, “I’m terrible, hey? Forgive me baby, you’ll forgive me.” (157)

She felt that, for them, “each kiss was a small ceremony of hatred” (157).

When Martha dances with Perry, he yells “like a tormented soul” or he breaks “suddenly into writhing jive, his head crushed back on his neck, his eyes closed, while he crooned, in a thick, blind, whining voice, in imitation of a Negro singing” (155). Martha begins to notice his eyes and the eyes of others, “for they were serious, anxious, even pleading; while all the time their bodies, their faces, contorted into the poses required of them. It was as if their surfaces, their limbs, their voices, were possessed, it was an exterior possession that did not touch them, left them free to judge and comment” (155–56). Frequently, Martha notes this same kind of split personality in herself, as she finds her more authentic self observing the mad behavior of her social self. Her observing self seems to echo what she imagines Perry’s to say: “‘Look how madly we are behaving’” (159).

Perry serves to focus our attention not just on madness in the way males and females interact in this colonial society but also on the rigid and strained relations between whites and blacks. The Sports Club has an all-white membership, but all the waiters are black. Suddenly Perry quits imitating “an American Negro” and begins a “parody of a native war dance.” “But for this he could not be alone, he must be in a group. . . . And soon a group of the wolves, headed by Perry, . . . grunted and sang [the words] ‘Hold him *down*, the Zulu warrior, Hold him *down*, the Zulu chief’” (206). Perry proceeds to tell one of the waiters to dance and, when he won’t, threatens him with violence. The terrified waiter is forced to perform, and when he won’t do it with any enthusiasm and runs off, Perry is furious and offended. The whites truly feel “ill-used and misunderstood” (207). Because Martha protests the madness of the situation, she is accused of becoming “‘a proper little nigger-lover’” (208).

After that, Martha breaks away from the Sports Club lifestyle but then discovers to her horror that her fiancé, Douglas Knowell, is normally one of the Sports Club gang. The night she agrees to marry him, he goes “off the tack,” heading for the club and his friends. Up all night, “the wolves had practically wrecked the town. . . . There was a chamberpot on the statue of Cecil Rhodes that morning, and all the lampposts were slashed with red paint” (225). In *Writing and Madness*, Shoshana Felman states: “Madness usually occupies a position of *exclusion*; it is the *outside* of a culture. But madness that is a *common* place occupies a position of *inclusion* and becomes the *inside* of a culture” (13). Madness is the social norm within the white Southern Rhodesian culture portrayed in *Martha Quest*.

Felman declares that “our entire era . . . has become subsumed within the space of madness” (14). Such is the world Doris Lessing portrays in *Shikasta*, written in 1979, twenty-seven years after *Martha Quest*. Towards the end of *Shikasta*, which Lessing labels space fiction, there is a lengthy trial during which representatives from a variety of countries and races testify against the mad behavior of the white race throughout the centuries; but the bulk of the trial consists of an indictment of the British who failed to protest what their settlers did in Southern Rhodesia.

From the very moment the white conquerors were given “self-government” they took away the black people’s lands, rights, freedoms and made slaves and servants of them in every way, using every device of force and intimidation, contempt, trickery. But never did Britain protest. Never, not once.” (328)

The British “*had the legal and moral responsibility* to step in and forcibly stop the whites from doing as they liked,” but they did nothing “because of their inherent and inbred contempt for peoples other than themselves” (329). But Lessing’s story of madness does not stop there, for the representative of the white race who declares himself guilty goes on to ask why the other races have not learned from the whites’ example: “‘Why is it that so many of you . . . have chosen to copy the materialism, the greed, the rapacity of the white man’s technological society?’” (335). Moreover, the whites have had no corner on this madness. Slavery was conducted “largely by Arabs and was made possible by the willing cooperation of black people” (338), and the Indians’ treatment of the Untouchables is unmatched “for baseness” (337). In her fantasy, *Shikasta*, it is only after the holocaust of World War III that the rampant universal madness of the twentieth century seems to end. As Felman points out, often “the madness silenced by society has been given voice by literature” (15). Indeed, *Shikasta* makes evident the madness that the people of the twentieth century would like to deny.

Ironically, the madness of inclusion (in which madness is the norm) can coexist with the madness of exclusion (in which the social madness creates the mad outsider). Feminist theorists like Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément point to the ways in which living in a patriarchal environment has repressed women and frequently led them to outbursts of hysteria or madness. In *The Newly Born Woman*, they observe that “societies do not succeed in offering everyone the same way of fitting into the symbolic order; those who are, if one may say so, between symbolic systems, in the interstices, offside, are the ones who are afflicted . . . with what we call madness” (7). Women, like the novelist, chronicler, and short story writer Bessie Head, are frequently among those who find themselves “offside,” and it can be through literature that they find their release from repression. In the words of Sandra Gilbert, “the country of writing ought to be a no where into which we can fly in a tarantella of rage and desire, a place beyond ‘vileness and compromise’ where the part of ourselves that longs to be free, . . . can write itself, can dream, can invent new worlds” (Foreword in Cixous xviii).

Conceived in South Africa by the mating of an upperclass white woman and a black stable “boy,” Bessie Head was born in the mental institution to which her ill-behaved mother had been committed. As a mulatto, Head was frequently rejected by both blacks and whites. As a female, she was mistreated by her sexist husband. As a South African in exile, she was treated as an outsider by the people of Botswana, the black nation to which she had fled expecting to escape the oppression of apartheid.

Bessie Head records what she knows about madness in her novel *A Question of Power* (1974). Her protagonist, Elizabeth, having lived in South Africa under apartheid knows that white people go “out of their way to hate you or loathe you” (19). But she is evidently less prepared to discover the misogyny of the African male. She finds African misogyny untempered by “love and tenderness and personal romantic treasuring of women” (137). In her hallucinations, two African males, Sello and Dan, use both heterosexuality and homosexuality to taunt her and make her feel inferior and degraded. To undermine Elizabeth’s sense of herself as a woman, Sello uses Medusa, and Dan uses his “seventy-one nice-time girls” (173).

In her hallucinations, Sello displays before Elizabeth his attraction to Medusa’s fantastic vagina: “It was abnormally constructed, like seven thousand vaginas in one, turned on and operating at white heat” (64). The evil Medusa puts herself on display for Elizabeth: “Without any bother for decencies she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation travelled out of her towards Elizabeth. It en-

veloped Elizabeth from head to toe like a slow, deep, sensuous bomb.” Looking at Elizabeth with “a mocking superior smile,” Medusa says, “‘You haven’t got anything *near* that, have you?’” (44).

Similarly, Dan taunts Elizabeth with the sexual superiority of his parade of women. He wants her to be jealous: “‘I go with all these women because you are inferior’” (147). One of the key images in Elizabeth’s madness is Dan “standing in front of her, his pants down, as usual, flaying his powerful penis in the air” (12–13). His women include Miss Wriggly-Bottom, Miss Pelican-Beak, Madame Make-Love On-The-Floor, and Madame Loose-Bottom. Elizabeth takes heavy doses of sleeping pills to block out his all-night activities with these “nice time girls,” for Dan sometimes tumbles these women into bed right beside Elizabeth (“They kept on bumping her awake” [127]). Furthermore, he encourages them to use her personal possessions to clean up: “He was abnormally obsessed with dirt on his women. They washed and washed in her bathroom; they put on Elizabeth’s dresses and underwear and made use of her perfumes” (128). Homosexuality is also used to make Elizabeth feel excluded. Dan tells Elizabeth that homosexuality is a “universal phenomenon” (138) and that Sello and his boyfriend “do it all the time” (139). Elizabeth’s hallucinations are extensions of her experience with her African husband: “Women were always complaining of being molested by her husband. Then there was also a white man who was his boy-friend” (19).

Recognizing the similarity between racists and sexists, Elizabeth calls them both “power-maniacs.” She wonders what “they gain[ed], the power people, while they lived off other people’s souls like vultures” (19). Elizabeth withstands the cruelty and torture of Medusa and the two men who inhabit her madness by not giving in to their view of her as nothing. At one point she tells Sello that he is making a mistake, for she is God too (38).

Like Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Elizabeth finds herself forced by her experience with racist and sexist attitudes to alter her concept of God. Like such feminist philosopher/theologians as Rosemary Ruether, Naomi Goldenberg, and Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Bessie Head’s protagonist rejects the hierarchy in traditional religions and calls for a more egalitarian world view. Elizabeth claims that people pray to a God they will never see, because God is, in fact, in ordinary people, not in the sky. She concludes that “you’ll find Medusa and Dan in heaven and hell, but you won’t find ordinary human kindness and decency there. God in heaven is too important to be decent” (197). Her ideal is to bring holiness down to earth. The Gods are, in fact, those “killed and killed and killed again in one cause after another for the liberation of mankind.” She sees the Gods as “ordinary, practical, sane people,

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seemingly their only distinction being that they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings" (31).

As in Doris Lessing's space fiction, there is a movement towards mysticism in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*. Elizabeth has been tested by the nightmare of madness. Once she has passed through this hell, her knowledge of evil helps her to rediscover an impersonal, mystical love. She is transported into a state in which there are "no private hungers to be kissed, loved, adored. And yet there was a feeling of being kissed by everything; by the air, the soft flow of life, people's smiles and friendships." This "vast and universal love" equalizes all things and all people. Elizabeth emerges from her hell with a confirmed belief in such love and a "lofty serenity of soul nothing could shake" (202). At the end of the novel she recognizes that humankind's fundamental error is the "relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky." Consequently, "since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed" (205). In short, people hurt other people, because they fail to perceive the sacredness—or God—in one another.

A mystical experience leads Lessing's protagonist to similar conclusions in *Martha Quest*. More precisely, however, Martha Quest's perception is of the oneness of the universe. She experiences "a slow integration, during which she, and the little animals, and the moving grasses, and the sun-warmed trees, and the slopes of shivering silvery meadows, and the great dome of blue light overhead, and the stones of earth under her feet, became one, shuddering together in a dissolution of dancing atoms." Her merging into oneness is a painful, not an easy or ecstatic experience: "She felt the rivers under the ground forcing themselves painfully along her veins, swelling them out in an unbearable pressure, her flesh was the earth, and suffered growth like a ferment; and her eyes stared, fixed like the eye of the sun. Not for one second longer . . . could she have borne it" (52). Inherent in the moment is a message, one which she must seize from the "wasting and creating chaos of darkness," but "already the thing was sliding backwards, becoming a whole in her mind, instead of a process" (53). Martha recognizes that ultimately human beings are inadequate. At times they can intuit the oneness and sacredness of all life, but they are unable to retain this knowledge long enough to have it guide their decision making.

Just as Martha tends to remember her mystical moment as an ecstatic rather than painful experience, so too does she reduce the "difficult knowledge" gained from the moment to the simplicity of a New Year's resolution or a religious platitude never to be taken seriously or put into practice. For example, because two "little bucks" were present and played integral parts in the painful process of becoming one with her physical

environment, Martha resolves never again to kill a young buck. But she is immediately angry with herself, for she realizes that she will fail to keep this resolution. Her insight is prophetic, for the very next day, unable to sleep, she takes an early morning walk, carrying a gun as was her habit. She finds herself shooting a buck "almost half-heartedly, because it happened to present itself," and she is amazed to see it fall dead. Here she is violating her resolve, not even out of a strong need or desire. She takes the dead buck home simply because "it was a pity to waste the meat" (56). This is not atypical of Martha's experience; she is constantly finding herself doing what intellectually and even emotionally she does not want to do. Indeed, she knows better.

Doris Lessing resigns herself to the fact that this tendency to do what we know we should not because we "forget" is just human nature. Human beings are incapable of better behavior. However, persisting in behavior that fails to recognize the interconnectedness of all individuals and all nature will bring on a major catastrophe. According to Lessing, failure to acknowledge the oneness of the universe means that social, economic, political, and physical violence will continue until human beings evolve into a higher consciousness or until something like a dose of radiation transforms their nature.

As Doris Lessing shifts her perspective from the planet to the cosmos in her space fiction, she reiterates what Martha Quest learns in her special moment on the veld: "her smallness, the unimportance of humanity." Martha learns that

what was futile was her own idea of herself and her place in the chaos of matter. What was demanded of her was that she should accept something quite different; it was as if something new was demanding conception, with her flesh as host; as if there were a necessity, which she must bring herself to accept, that she should allow herself to dissolve and be formed by that necessity. (52-53)

In her fantasy novel *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), Lessing speaks of the Necessity and in *Shikasta*, the laws of Canopus, to which human beings must submit if their species is to survive. Basically, they must acknowledge by their behavior the oneness of life. Both books suggest that long ago this sense of oneness did prevail. Life on earth was once truly Edenic, but this harmonious way of life was lost in an ancient catastrophe. A future catastrophe will, it seems, restore it. Meanwhile, in both books, humans are condemned for thinking in terms of "I" instead of "we." From his own outer space, Charles Watkins, the mad protagonist in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, sees humankind as mad. According to his observation, saying "I, I, I, I, is their madness," for in fact "they form a unity, they have a single mind, a single being,

and never can they say I, I, without making the celestial watchers roll with laughter or weep with pity." There has been a divorce between "the 'I' and the 'We,' some sort of a terrible falling-away" (109). Until the sense of "we" can be restored, envoys are sent to earth to "keep alive, in any way possible, the knowledge that humanity, with its fellow creatures, the animals and plants, make up a whole, are a unity, have a function in the whole system as an organ or organism." This is an interim strategy until the human species evolves into higher consciousness: "They have not yet evolved into an understanding of their individual selves as merely parts of a whole, first of all humanity, their own species, let alone achieving a conscious knowledge of humanity as part of Nature; plants, animals, birds, insects, reptiles, all these together making a small chord in the Cosmic Harmony" (128-29). Lessing thus puts into perspective the "dividing-off, compartmenting, pigeon-holing" (129) that causes racism, sexism, class consciousness, ecological problems, and world wars.

Through her fiction, Doris Lessing moves us from individual concerns (like Martha's with racism and sexism) to social, economic, and political concerns, brought out, for example, as her protagonists in *The Four-Gated City* or *The Summer Before the Dark* change their clothes and roles and move through different classes of society to observe how differently they are treated. When Lessing turns to cosmic fiction, her focus shifts to philosophical and spiritual concerns. She carries us through the complexity of life back to the simple laws that govern it. In *Shikasta*, we read that our worst crime is arrogance—"a lack of humility and the curiosity that is based on humility" (320-21). There, too, she states her belief that "we are all creatures of the stars and their forces, they make us, we make them, we are part of a dance from which we by no means and not ever may consider ourselves separate" (40). This is the Necessity to which humans must submit, and that world view has implications for what is proper in human behavior.

In her preface to *Shikasta*, Doris Lessing claims that there is an explosion of science fiction and space fiction in our time because "the human mind is being forced to expand" (x). In order to gain a better perspective on the present, the human mind must go both backwards and forwards through time. Like other writers about the future, Lessing goes back to the sacred literature of the past. Lessing states that science fiction and space fiction writers must explore "the sacred literatures of the world in the same bold way they take scientific and social possibilities to their logical conclusions." She says that we "make a mistake when we dismiss [sacred literature of all races and nations] as quaint fossils from a dead past" (x). In *Shikasta*, she shifts her readers' perspectives so that the present is illuminated by the ancient past and the far future.

She retells the whole history of humankind from an ethical/religious perspective.

Like Bessie Head, Doris Lessing presents us with not only a vision of oneness but a necessity for oneness. The alternatives are too horrible to contemplate, and yet she makes us confront the inevitability of an ecological or nuclear catastrophe in *The Four-Gated City*; the inevitability of a breakdown in the effectiveness of government because of bureaucracies, elitism, and pollution in *Memoirs of a Survivor*; and the inevitability of World War III in *Shikasta*. All of these catastrophes occur because of our failure to think in terms of "we."

In Bessie Head's fiction as in Doris Lessing's, the blame is shared. There is no single race or nation that has a corner on the current madness and guilt. Bessie Head draws parallels in her novels between the egomania that causes the domination of women and that which is inherent in Nazi anti-Semitism, Ku Klux Klan behavior, Black Power fist raising in the United States, the mistreatment of the African male as Kaffir, and black Africans' prejudice against "Coloureds" and especially against the Masarwa tribe (or Bushmen) in Botswana (*A Question of Power* 47, 92, 132-33; *When Rain Clouds Gather* 171, *Maru* 17, 41). One of the main characters in Head's novel *Maru* is a Masarwa woman who is educated by a missionary so she can teach school. But she is taunted even in the classroom by her students ("Since when did a Bushy go to school?"), and the principal thinks firing her will be unusually easy because she is a female as well as a Masarwa (17, 41). The character Maru reflects on the irony of black Africans treating others as the white man treated them:

How universal was the language of oppression! They had said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man: "They can't think for themselves. They don't know anything." The matter never rested there. The stronger man caught hold of the weaker man and made a circus animal out of him, reducing him to the state of misery and subjection and non-humanity. The combinations were the same, first conquest, then abhorrence at the looks of the conquered and, from there onwards, all forms of horror and evil practices." (109)

In contrast to such horrors, Bessie Head and Doris Lessing give brief glimpses of what a utopian society might be like. In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth is gradually healed by her relationship with the uneducated, hardworking woman, Kenosi, with whom she gardens. Her relationship with this woman keeps in sight the possibility of something quite different from the patriarchal relationships she has in her hallucinations: their "work-relationship had been established on the solid respect of one partner for another" (160). In *Martha Quest*, a symbolic

picture of a utopia is provoked by the distressing sight of “a team of oxen, a plough, a native driver with his long whip, and at the head of the team a small black child, naked except for a loincloth.” Martha feels an overwhelming sense of pity for the black child, son of “a harsh and violent man”—rendered harsh and violent, one assumes, by the harshness and violence that characterize the racist society in which he lives. And then “her mind swam and shook” and “instead of one black child, she saw a multitude, and so lapsed easily into her favorite day-dream”—that of the four-gated city whose “citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together,” watching and approving of “the blue-eyed, fair-skinned children of the North playing hand in hand with the bronze-skinned, dark-eyed children of the South” (10–11). Out of the painful vision of the child, Martha fabricates the joyful vision of the city. Knowing the one enables her to know its opposite in a way that others cannot.

The sight of a violent black man in Nadine Gordimer’s novel *Burger’s Daughter* functions similarly as a recurring spur for the protagonist Rosa Burger to persist in her political activities. It is such moments that provoke the realization of the necessity for an alternative. Born and raised by white, activist parents in South Africa, the protagonist Rosa Burger is driving along when she sees a donkey-drawn cart with a woman and child huddled in terror among the sacks. An elderly black man is standing on the cart:

Suddenly his body arched back with one upflung arm against the sky and lurched over as if he had been shot and at that instant the donkey was bowed by a paroxysm that seemed to draw its four legs and head down towards the centre of its body in a noose, then fling head and extremities wide again; and again the man violently salaamed, and again the beast curved together and flew apart. (208)

For Rosa, the donkey, cart, driver, and mother and child behind him “made a single object that contracted against itself in the desperation of a hideous final energy.” What that scene represents for her is

the entire ingenuity from thumbscrew and rack to electric shock, the infinite variety and gradation of suffering, by lash, by fear, by hunger, by solitary confinement—the camps, concentration, labour, resettlement, the Siberias of snow or sun, the lives of Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki, Kathrada, Kgosana, gull-picked on the Island, Lionel [her imprisoned father] propped wasting to his skull between two warders. (208)

Faced with so much suffering that she cannot determine when or how to intervene, Rosa’s first reaction is to leave her native South Africa. “After the donkey I couldn’t stop myself. I don’t know how to live in Lionel’s country” (210). But later in the novel, Rosa Burger realizes that

she cannot stay away and ignore this suffering; her place is in South Africa. She must rejoin the struggle. This is symbolized by the epigraph for section two of the novel: “To know and not to act is not to know” (213).

Through writing her next dystopian novel *July’s People* (1981), Nadine Gordimer seeks an end to the psychological and social madness created by apartheid or any master-servant relationship. She reveals how even the white South African liberals are collaborators benefiting from racist policies. In this book Gordimer presents a dystopian vision of the future. Through it she can perhaps move white readers to take action to abolish apartheid and the many injustices suffered by blacks, thereby preventing the situation described in the novel from becoming a reality. In *July’s People* violence has erupted. With the help of Cuban and Soviet missiles, the black Africans have taken over the cities, and the white Smales family is saved—presumably from death—only by the ingenuity of their servant July, who allows them to escape with him to his village. However, in the village, the power shifts from the whites to the blacks, just as it had in the city. Roles are reversed; July, the servant, becomes the master. Once again there is dominance rather than equality.

Through depicting in *July’s People* what it would be like to be a white person abruptly thrown into a basically hostile black African village, Gordimer conveys a little of what the black person experiences when thrown into an alien white environment. To survive in the white world, July had to learn English; Bam and Maureen Smales need to know, but do not know, July’s African language. Unable to speak and comprehend the dominant tongue, they are rendered powerless. Unable to understand local customs or methods of getting food and necessities, the Smales family becomes almost entirely dependent upon July for their survival. Because Bam cannot be seen driving his small truck called a bakkie, July takes over the keys. A little later, Daniel, one of the villagers, steals Bam’s gun and goes off to fight against the whites for possession of the country. The Smales no longer have any police protection, and both the chief of the village and July have the power at any time to deny them the safety the village provides. On the one hand, they are—like the urban blacks—invisible, nonparticipants in the social system; on the other hand, they are totally visible because they are watched closely by everyone in the village.

Furthermore, Bam and Maureen Smales lose their status and traditional roles when they enter the African village. Their marital relationship is destroyed by this breakdown of their social order. Powerless, Bam can no longer support or protect his family. He does not know anymore how to speak to his wife Maureen, because, without their roles, they seem to have no self or identity. He is unable to see this woman he lives with now either as Maureen or as someone functioning in any of her

past roles—wife, mother, partner, dance teacher, daughter; therefore, he views this female as “her” (104–05). He views her as a presence whose “sense of self he could not follow because here there were no familiar areas in which it could be visualized moving, no familiar entities that could be shaping it” (105). Likewise, Maureen can no longer identify Bam as the man she had known back home in the “master bedroom.” No longer able to function as her financial and physical protector, he seems useless; “she looked down on this man who had nothing, now” (145). When the village chief asks Bam to explain what is currently happening in South Africa between the blacks and whites, Maureen is quick to perceive that what he was really asking about was “an explosion of roles, that’s what the blowing up of the Union Buildings and the burning of the master bedrooms is” (117). Similarly, July had lost his role and status as a commander of women when he went to work for the Smales, for Maureen had been his daily master and he her “boy.” July tells her bitterly, “Fifteen years / your boy / you satisfy” (98). July’s wife knew and resented the fact that her husband took orders from a woman in that white world (82).

This loss of identity and well-defined roles is central to the terror evoked by this South African dystopia. To the white reader, this bizarre living situation is, indeed, stranger than fiction. Maureen has one novel with her but eventually finds she cannot read it, for why read fiction?—“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). Without any physical, intellectual, or aesthetic amenities, Maureen becomes intensely aware of body odors, she learns to wash her menstrual rags in the river, and she drowns kittens in a bucket because there is insufficient food to go around. What is terrifying to these whites is the African villagers’ seeming passivity: they exhibit no interest in altering their way of life (107).

In desperation, Maureen seeks to play a subservient and semi-intimate role with July. She discovers, however, that she, who had had control over his daily life, rather than Bam, the real white power, has earned all of July’s hostility. Furthermore, she has absolutely no power over him anymore, for “his measure as a man was taken elsewhere and by others. She was not his mother, his wife, his sister, his friend, his people.” His lack of response to her plea for a new kind of relationship makes her understand for the first time the true nature of their prior employer/employee interactions. She suddenly “understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him” (152).

More quickly than Bam, Maureen sees the total impossibility of their situation. July will obey black soldiers when they show up in the village

just as he had obeyed whites, and for the same reason: he is powerless. By hiding his white family instead of staying in town to fight with his own people, July is already a traitor, a nonhero. So too is Bam a nonhero. Because Bam is politically on the side of the revolutionaries, he will not fight for the South African whites, and he will not fight with the village chief who wants to defend himself against the revolutionary blacks when they arrive. Ironically, it is these same rebels who may kill Bam.

Thus, it is not surprising that, deserted by Bam and July, Maureen runs toward the helicopter that one day lands near the village. From the noise of the helicopter, “her body in its rib-cage is thudded with deafening vibration, invaded by a force pumping, jiggling in its monstrous orgasm.” This masculine symbol comes down with “its landing gear like spread legs, battling the air with whirling scythes” (158). Concerned only for her own survival, Maureen is instinctively drawn toward this representation of male power. Her fantasy is of “a kitchen, a house just the other side of the next tree” (159). The book ends with the two words “She runs,” and critics have speculated about what it is she is running towards. Will the helicopter contain saviors or murderers? If those who descend from the helicopter are black revolutionaries, how will they respond to Maureen’s desire to be saved? If they will be inhabiting the new “master bedrooms” of Africa, will Maureen be accepted inside?

In Gordimer’s next novel, *A Sport of Nature* (1987), she develops further this desire of a white woman to share the future of black Africans as an insider. Its white, South African protagonist, Hillela, is a disturbing character, for she seems at once unprincipled and effective. She does not act out of moral or political commitment, and yet, personally free of prejudice, she is the one to cross over the racial barrier effectively, marrying first a black revolutionary and then a black ruler. Under their aegis, she works continually and efficiently for the new black Africa. By running towards the new black male power figures, just as Maureen ran towards the male power symbol, the beautiful Hillela comes successfully under their protection. Protection is also what Maureen Smales hoped for, but she probably made the shift too late in her life for it to be acceptable to the blacks. Indeed, Maureen may be viewed kindly as “a survivor” or—much less kindly—as the same kind of self-centered opportunist many accused Hillela of being.

The latter part of *A Sport of Nature* is a fantasy in which we witness “the proclamation of the new African state that used to be South Africa” (337). Hillela succeeds in being an integral participant in that ceremony, but only because, as Nadine Gordimer says, “‘Hillela is a kind of freak. She represents a break with all the ways that have been tried’” (Clemons). Hillela is a “sport of nature,” an “abnormal variation” in South African society, because she is free of racial prejudice. She is free of prejudice

not by calculated intention but by nature. Moreover, she is attracted to black males. She was kicked out of school as a young girl because she innocently befriended a "coloured" boy, and she has inherited her spirit from her mother, who left marriage, family, and country to follow a man she loved. Hillela's actions are determined by her passions. Yet she is not a woman who can be pushed around, and she plays an active role in helping the revolution and the new African nations.

For Nadine Gordimer, as for Doris Lessing and Bessie Head, the future could be a dystopia or a utopia, depending upon the decisions we make in the present. Growing up in southern Africa made all three writers especially sensitive to the barriers between people. Barriers that separate, based on race or gender or class, breed madness in individuals as in social policies. Their novels suggest that experiencing mystical moments and/or witnessing moments of grotesque human violence convinced them that alternatives had to be found. Their dystopian fantasies and hallucinations help readers better understand the nature of and the consequences of injustice and evil. Their utopian fantasies enable readers to imagine positive alternatives. In the words of Sasha, Hillela's cousin, in *A Sport of Nature*, a utopia may be unattainable but "without aiming for it—taking a chance!—you can never hope even to fall far short of it." He concludes that "without utopia—the idea of utopia—there's a failure of the imagination—and that's a failure to know how to go on living" (187).

Doris Lessing, Bessie Head, and Nadine Gordimer have dedicated their lives to enhancing our ability to see and analyze the mad human behavior that has gone on in the past and still goes on today. Through the stories they tell, these three talented writers help us to imagine what the tomorrows could bring. Their novels make clear that to alter attitudes and behavior to support what is just, rational, and sane is a necessity. Until individuals not only know this but also act accordingly, the madness will continue.

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