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Southern Africa and the Theme of Madness: Novels by Doris Lessing, Bessie Head, and Nadine Gordimer

Nancy Topping Bazin

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 colonialist, racist, and sexist attitudes that permeated their lives have determined, to a major extent, the nature of their fiction. Their novels reflect the grotesque situations and bizarre human relationships created by prejudice, injustice, and the desire to dominate. These three authors focus on the mad nature of this social and political situation in southern Africa. In their works, dystopian and utopian visions of the future provide perspectives from which to view the nightmarish quality of the past and present. These writers 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. Although other works by these women writers will be mentioned, this chapter focuses upon *Martha Quest*, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, and *Shikasta* by Doris Lessing, *Maru* and *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head, and *Burger's Daughter*, *July's People*, and *A Sport of Nature* by Nadine Gordimer.

There are degrees and forms of madness. Groups may judge an individual's behavior to be "mad" and commit that person to a mental institution. But individuals may also view various forms of group behavior as "mad." 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. These young whites spend every evening from 1935 through 1938 having a good time. Their leader is the wild, fun-loving, beer-drinking Binkie, whose rousing call to join in the fun is: "'Come on, let's-tear-it-to-pieces!'" (136). The young women are 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, a young woman typically has to endure being forcibly kissed by a number of the so-called wolves, whose excuse is always their inability to resist her charms. Martha feels that, in truth, for these young men, "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 imitation of a Negro singing" (155). Martha begins to notice his eyes and the eyes of others; their eyes were "anxious, even pleading" at the same time that their faces and bodies were "contorted into the poses required of them." They appeared to be possessed, but "it was an exterior possession that . . . left them free to judge and comment" (156). 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 to say: "'Look how madly we are behaving'" (159).

Perry serves to focus our attention not just upon madness in the way males and females interact in this colonial society but also upon 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 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." He sings the following 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 will not, threatens him with violence. The terrified waiter is forced to perform, and when he will not do it with any enthusiasm and runs off, Perry is furious and offended. White males often charge blacks, women, and other oppressed groups who are the butts of their jokes with lacking a sense of humor. Perry's group truly feels "ill-used and misunderstood," and Martha observes, "It was like a madness" (207). When she protests to her friend Donovan, she is accused of becoming "'a proper little nigger-lover'" (208). Sexism and racism are part of the colonialist lifestyle and philosophy of domination that Martha Quest struggles to reject.

Thus, Martha breaks away from the Sports Club parties; but then she 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 Sports Club and his friends (224). Up all night, the "wolves" "practically wrecked the town." They put "a chamberpot on the statue of Cecil Rhodes" and red paint on every lamppost (225). As Shoshana Felman states in her book *Writing and Madness*: "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*. Toward 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. . . . *Britain had the legal and moral responsibility* to step in and forcibly stop the whites from doing as they liked. (328-29)

However, they did nothing "because of their inherent and inbred contempt for peoples other than themselves" (329). 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 co-operation 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). Literary fantasy is the means by which Lessing gains the freedom to make us see ourselves and our time and place from a cosmic perspective. By calling into question predominant values and behavior, *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 psychological release from repression. In the words of Sandra Gilbert: "[T]he 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" (Introduction, Cixous and Clément, xviii).

Conceived in South Africa by the mating of an upper-class 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 usually rejected by both blacks and whites. Living in a misogynous culture, 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 to escape the oppression of apartheid.

In her novel *A Question of Power* (1974), Bessie Head articulates the experience of a black African woman driven "mad" by the madness surrounding her. She claims this book is "completely autobiographical" (Beard, 45). The protagonist, Elizabeth, having lived in South Africa under apartheid, knows that white people go "out of their way to hate you" (19). She is less prepared, however, to accept from the African male equally blatant hatred directed toward her as an African female. She finds the African's misogyny even more cruel than that of the white man, because it is less tempered by "love and tenderness and personal romantic treasuring of women" (137). The madness of misogyny added to the madness of racism becomes too much for her to bear, thus causing her breakdown.

Like racism, misogyny undermines the victim's self-esteem. 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).

Sello displays before Elizabeth his attraction to Medusa's fantastic vagina: "It was . . . 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 enveloped 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'" (128), for Dan sometimes tumbles these women into her bed: "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" (128). Dan also uses homosexuality to make Elizabeth feel excluded. He tells her 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 experiences 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" who live "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 experiences 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 worldview. Elizabeth claims that people pray to a God they will never see, because God is, in fact, in ordinary people, not in the sky (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, seemingly their only distinction being that they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings" (31; emphasis added).

As in Doris Lessing's space fiction works *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* and *The Making of the Representative from Planet Eight*, there is a movement toward 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 and escape into its opposite—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" (205). 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. The mystical experience of oneness is the ideal; assigning God a place in each of us is the means.

A mystical experience leads Lessing's protagonist to similar conclusions in *Martha Quest*. Martha Quest's perception is of the oneness of the universe. She experiences a slow, painful merging of her body with the animals, the grasses, the trees, and the stones. They "became one, shuddering together in a dissolution of dancing atoms" (52). Inherent in the moment is a message, that she must seize quickly, for "already the thing was sliding backwards" (53). What Martha intuits in that moment are the oneness and sacredness of all life. But she recognizes, too, the inadequacy of human beings, for we are unable to retain this

knowledge long enough to live according to it.

Just as Martha tends to remember her mystical moment falsely as an ecstatic rather than painful experience, she quickly reduces the "difficult knowledge" (53) 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 small bucks were present and played integral parts in her 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 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 when it falls dead (56). Here she is violating her resolve, not even out of a strong need or desire. She takes the dead buck home simply because she did not want 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 human nature. Human beings seem incapable of better behavior. Yet, persisting in behavior that ignores the interconnectedness of all individuals and all nature will bring on a major catastrophe—the cause and nature of which are left vague at the end of Lessing's novel *The Four-Gated City* but is specifically World War III at the end of *Shikasta*. Failure to acknowledge the oneness of the universe means that social, economic, political, and physical violence will continue until, Lessing suggests, human beings evolve into a higher consciousness or until something like a dose of radiation transforms their nature. Until human beings change, the current madness will continue.

As Doris Lessing shifts her perspective from the planet to the cosmos in her space fiction novels, she reiterates what Martha Quest learns in her special moment on the veld: "her smallness, the unimportance of humanity" (52). Martha learns she has been mistaken in "her own idea of herself and her place in the chaos of matter. . . . 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" (53).

Lessing again speaks of the Necessity in her 1971 fantasy novel, *Briefing for a Descent Into Hell*, and she speaks of the laws of Canopus in *Shikasta*. Both books suggest that human beings must submit to these higher laws if their species is to survive. Basically, they must acknowledge by their behavior the oneness of life. Both novels 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 works, 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" (128). 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 personal concerns (like Martha's with racism and sexism) to more general 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 worldview 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 backward and forward 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 humanity 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 contemplate 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 novels, 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 between the egomania that causes the domination of women and the egomania inherent in each of the following: Nazi anti-Semitism, Ku Klux Klan behavior, black power fist-raising in the United States (*Question*, 47, 92, 132-33), the mistreatment of the African male as Kaffir (*When Rain Clouds Gather*, 171), and the black Africans' prejudice against "Coloureds" and especially against the Masarwa tribe (or Bushmen) in Botswana. One of the main characters in Head's second novel, *Maru*, is a Masarwa woman who was educated by a missionary so that she could 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, who treat 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 native with a whip driving a team of oxen led by a small child (10). 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. Then "her mind swam and shook" and "instead of one black child, she saw a multitude, and so lapsed easily into her favorite daydream"—that of the four-gated city where black, white, and brown adults watch with approval "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. Seeing the one provokes a quest for its opposite.

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. Such moments make her intensely aware of the necessity for an alternative. Born and raised by white activist parents in South Africa, Rosa Burger is driving along when she sees a donkey-drawn cart with a woman and child huddled in terror among the sacks. The black driver, frustrated by his own victimization, in turn, abuses his animal and his family. Rosa sees him standing on the moving 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" (208). 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, the deaths by questioning, bodies fallen from the height of John Vorster Square, deaths by dehydration, babies degutted by enteritis in "places" of banishment, the lights beating all night on the faces of those in cells. (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 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 are taking 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 its survival. Because Bam cannot be seen driving his own small truck, called a *bakkie*, July keeps 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 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 every villager.

Both 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" (105). 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 macho role and status when he had gone to the Smales to work, for Maureen had been his daily master and he her "boy." July tells her bitterly, "Fifteen years/your boy/you satisfy" (98). Just as Maureen lost her respect for her husband in the black African village where he had no power, the black African wife's respect for July had been permanently diminished by his lack of power in the white-dominated city. To become powerless and hence to lose control over one's own life mean a loss of social status but also a loss of self-esteem and a clear sense of one's own identity. This loss of identity and well-defined roles is central to the terror evoked by this South African dystopia.

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 was already a traitor, a non-hero. So, too, in the village Bam is a nonhero. He will not fight with the village chief, who wants to defend himself against the revolutionary blacks. Politically, Bam is on the side of the revolutionaries; ironically, these same rebels may kill him.

It is not surprising then 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, jigging in its monstrous orgasm" (158). 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 toward. Will the helicopter contain saviors or murderers? If black men 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. Being in the master bedroom with the new men in power makes that possible. The white South African protagonist, Hillela, crosses 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. 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 can be part of the new world, 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, 78). Hillela is a "sport of nature" (defined in the epigraph as an "abnormal variation") in South African society, because she is free of racial prejudice. Distrustful of words, her decision making is determined by instinct and sexual passion. Meanwhile, her cousin Sasha, who makes decisions based upon political commitment, spends time in jail and then leaves the country. Despite his revolutionary commitment, he is unable to achieve the degree of

integration into the black revolutionary societies of southern Africa that Hillela does through marriages.

Nevertheless, Hillela has to face the fact that the time was not yet right to realize her utopian dream of having an "African family of rainbow-coloured children" (223). Loving the skin and hair of the Other cuts at the root of racism; yet love between a few interracial couples cannot by itself alter an oppressive social structure. Moreover, this white female/black male attraction often hurts the black female—which a close reading of *A Sport of Nature* and Gordimer's next novel, *My Son's Story*, makes all too evident. Physical and spiritual love between whites and blacks is one way to undermine the madness of racism, but that love will be fragile in a struggle for dominance or in a racist or patriarchal context—white or black. Will the new African government itself be free of racism, and will black women be empowered? At the end of this futuristic novel, the answers to those questions are not clear. Still, the image of an interracial couple at the founding of the new African nation suggests that racial harmony may eventually prevail.

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 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" (187). 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). The novels of Doris Lessing, Bessie Head, and Nadine Gordimer make clear that to alter attitudes and behavior to support what is just, rationality and sanity are necessary. Until individuals not only know this but also act accordingly, the madness will continue.

NOTE

An earlier version of this chapter, entitled "Madness, Mysticism, and Fantasy: Shifting Perspectives in the Novels of Doris Lessing, Bessie Head, and Nadine Gordimer," appeared in *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 33.1 (Spring 1992): 73-87.

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