CHAPTER III

Reading Trauma in Nadine Gordimer's Novels

3.1 Theoretical Approaches

The term 'trauma' may be said to mean a painful or distressing experience that leaves indelible marks on the psyche of an individual and affects his or her perception of the external world. Trauma studies generally deals with psychological trauma and the role it plays in shaping individual and cultural identities. It is also concerned with the possibility of representation of trauma through language. Recently scholars of trauma studies have often combined psychoanalytic theories with poststructural and postcolonial theories. As a literary approach, trauma theory examines the impact and representation of trauma in literature through an analysis of psychological and cultural significance of trauma.

Trauma studies in literary criticism emerged in the 1990s as a multidisciplinary field largely drawing on the Freudian theory of trauma. Scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman critically examined the concept of trauma and its role in literature and society. They popularised the concept of trauma as an event that cannot be represented precisely. In her scholarly book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), Caruth views trauma through the lens of Freud and treats trauma as a delayed return of the repressed. According to Caruth, it is difficult to fully represent a traumatic experience because of its latency. Both individual and historical traumatic events are known only through an interrupted referentiality that points to the meaning of the past only as a kind of reproduction (Caruth, 11). The unspeakable nature of trauma remains a dominant concept in literary studies for "imagining trauma's function in literature" (Balaev 1). This traditional model of trauma also claims that language is unable to locate the truth of the past.

The classical model developed by Caruth and others was followed by alternative models and approaches over the last two decades, which suggest a wide range of representational possibilities. The different approaches to trauma studies have been described as the pluralistic model of trauma because of the plurality of theories and approaches employed. Critics such as Michael Rothberg and Greg Forter explore the way

traumatic experience is represented in literature by a combination of psychoanalytic theory and postcolonial theory or cultural studies. On the other hand, Luckhurst, Mandel and Visser focus on the social and political implications of trauma within a variety of frameworks. The pluralistic model of trauma moves beyond the structural dimensions of trauma and concentrate on the cultural significance of trauma and the diversity of narrative expression. The early theory of trauma "centralizes pathological fragmentation" and suggests the possibility that traumatic experience "uncovers new relationship between experience, language, and knowledge" (Mambrol 9). Further, the traditional model of trauma assumes memory as a fixed process but the postcolonial trauma studies views memory as a fluid process of reconstruction which allows the traumatic past to be created and recreated in the moments of recollection. Thus socio-cultural factors influence the meaning of the traumatic event because the recollection process in the present moment is influenced by cultural and historical contexts. Craps argues that trauma studies must take into account the social and historic relations for ethical effectiveness (53). Mengel and Borzaga found Caruth's formulation inadequate to analyse the trauma in South Africa because trauma in this case is involved with the history of apartheid. It (apartheid) has caused the collective traumatization of several generations and therefore it is neither an unclaimed nor 'unclaimable' experience. Nevertheless, Caruth's notion of the inexpressible nature of traumatic wound cannot be ignored completely. Literature has to "present, represent, and dramatize trauma in its many manifestations" without claiming precision or exact nature of trauma (Visser 6).

Trauma is multi-dimensional and complex in nature. One thing is obvious that trauma is a kind of interplay between the past and the present, and that traumatic experiences may have a firm hold on the present in one's life in a way that they may fail to overcome trauma. However, Boris Cyrulnik, a French psychiatrist, argues that this interplay may open up the possibility of generating resilience or the capacity of a person to recover from trauma. Supporting Cyrulnik's arguments, Isabel Fraile Murlanch says that one of the factors behind the development of resilience is the way in which present and past combine in the narratives, the wounded person builds up to make sense of the past event he has suffered. In other words, narrative can play a role in developing resilience. Murlanch contends that facing an event that would traumatise other people, those who are truly resilient may feel wounded, but not traumatised. Resilience depends

largely on the victim's ability to, what Cyrulnik calls, "organise one's own history", so that representation turns out to be healing and traumatic as well (quoted in Murlanch 117). Murlanch further agrees with Cyrulnik who asserts that trauma may not be reversible but it can be repaired. The traumatic experience can leave an indelible mark on the life of the victim forever without necessarily leading her/him to neurosis.

3. 2 Gordimer's Novels

Nadine Gordimer has written most of her fiction against the background of the apartheid South Africa. The trauma of apartheid has had a damaging impact on the life of the characters she created. Most of them either experienced apartheid or became victims of apartheid. As such their personal life is intricately related with the politics or the public world. In *Occasion for Loving*, according to Judie Newman, Gordimer draws upon her own childhood experience to "transform a personal trauma into a political metaphor" (26). Like Gordimer herself, Jessie Stilwell was withdrawn from school when she was about ten years old on the pretext of a heart ailment which she never suffered from. Prevented from physical activity and kept close to her mother, Jessie became too dependent on her mother who was unhappily married to Bruno Fuecht. This had a lasting impact on the personality of Jessie. She led a life of silence and quietude. And she carries in her mind the illusion of silence and motionlessness of her mother's house even after her marriage. However, before the birth of her son Morgan she visits a doctor and discovers the terrible lie around which her mother brought her up. She had visited a heart specialist to confirm whether her old ailment would be a cause of worry for the normal birth of a child. The doctor told her

> with emphatic quiet that not only her heart perfectly normal, in fact it was not possible that a heart ailment serious enough to keep a child out of school for years could leave no sign of damage. (*OL* 83)

Jessie's mother has "brain-washed her" in such a way that she (Jessie) loses herself as woman. Due to her mother's over interest in her, Jessie could not enjoy a normal childhood. In fact, she has lost the vitality of her life. She has been leading a lonely life, which is reflective of the life of the white bourgeois –the minority –in South Africa of the time. Jessie leaves her mother's house to her husband's but still feels in her subconscious that she has not left her mother's house. After the death of her first

husband in his youth, Jessie realised that "a large part of her life was missing", that she was handed from mother to husband to become a mother without ever enjoying the joy and freedom of youthful life. She felt "cheated" and therefore even the Christmas became an occasion of "revulsion and resentment" (*OL* 45).

As a woman pushed to silence and loneliness and a mother who has an awkward relationship with her son Morgan from her first marriage, Jessie "undertakes a retrospective reconstruction of her past" (Newman 27). This reconstruction runs parallel to her present husband, Tom's attempt to write an impartial history of Africa. Gordimer uses the technique of flashback of some scenes to make Jessie rebuild her past. In one such scene from her past, Jessie remembers how she awakens in the middle of the night and confronts her mother outside the bathroom door. She shames her mother with her unspoken awareness that her mother has been making love with Fuecht. This scene has the connotation of a Fruedian 'primal scene' and suggests Jessies's ambivalent attitude to her mother. Jessie was trembling with pity and shame. But it was not clear if she was angry at her mother's outrage or she wanted to "shame her mother" (*OL* 24). Subsequently, another scene resurfaces in her mind in which she sees the "shape of cold terror" on the back of her neck as she turned her back to the dark passage behind the bathroom door at night. For twenty years she tried to find out "who it was that threatened to come up behind her" (*OL* 75). Jessie's fear is identified in Oedipal terms, which is strengthened by the juxtaposition of the bathroom scenes and by her remembered terror of brown electrical plugs, associated Fuecht because of his expertise in electrical works.

However, the arrival of Ann and Boaz Davis at the Stilwells' house rouses Jessie's desire to pursue "the life dreamt and not lived" (*OL* 74). A brilliant dancer and an open minded girl, Ann becomes a source of life in a short time with her cheerful nature and tendency to break the conventions. She rejuvenates in Jessie an intense desire for privacy. Jessie had, at last, time to ask herself why she lived though she did not search for the possible answers. As she has been exploring her past, she suddenly discovers that Ann Davis has begun an affair with Gideon Shibalo, a black painter. With her flamboyant and unreflective life style, Ann provides an alter ego to Jessie, the lost image of her youth. She tolerates the interracial love affair because, she thinks, she settled "the race business" long ago (*OL* 290). But by the end of the narrative she comes to understand that this is not the case. Ann begins her journey in the novel in an apparent

colour-blindness by developing her affair across the colour bar. She gradually becomes aware of Gideon as black first, and then as a man. Their affair finally fails under its own pressure, not because of state intervention through such acts as the Immorality Act of 1950. Their relationship fails because of the repressions of apartheid which have become psychologically inscribed in them. Jessie recognizes the same "prestructuring effects of apartheid upon her psyche" when Ann and Gideon visit her in the beach house (Newman 30). While talking to Gideon, she suddenly discovers her childhood fear as emanating from "the black man" that she must never be left alone with in their house. Jessie continues her conversation with Gideon. In her early life she used feel at night that someone was following her from behind. She would ask,

> Who was it, do you think? And how many more little white girls are there for whom the very first man was a black man? . . . Gideon, I'd forgotten … It's only when something like you and Ann happens *one suddenly needs to feel one's way back*." (emphasis added, *OL* 290).

Now, as Newman points out, Jessie's memories obscure a culturally inscribed fear. In the end of the novel she discovers that the source of her repressions is not her European father Bruno Fuecht, but the black African. She has been "constructed by an African past" and by admitting it she "historicizes trauma" (Newman 31). Gordimer here links a personal trauma to the historical conditions of South Africa. Secondly, she combines the past and the present of Jessie in the narrative in such a way that she develops resilience which helps her recover from trauma. The techniques of flash back and interior monologue help the author probe into the mind of characters, particularly Jessie. Another literary technique, sudden shift in the point of view gives the text a fluidity to connect the personal and the political themes.

After the departure of Ann, Jessie comes across the abandoned black lover Gideon just as Rosa unexpectedly meets her childhood brother Baasie. Drunk and forlorn, Gideon initially fails to recognize Jessie but finally he seems to recognize her. And when he recognizes her, his reaction is characterized with colour and gender. "White bitch –get away" (*OL* 331). Subsequently he forgets the episode. But Jessie knows that what Gideon revealed has not gone away. Jessie's specific moments of critical challenge to her consciousness connect with that of Rosa and Baasie or

Zwelinzima. The midnight phone call that Rosa Burger receives from Baasie has had a traumatic effect on her. She wants to defect from the resistance heritage of her father in order to assert her identity. So she leaves South Africa and joins her step mother Katya in Nice, France to lead a personal life of luxury. Away from the racially divided society of South Africa, Rosa leads in France a happy and carefree life among people whose sole objectives are pleasure and loyalty to friends. But her uncompromised individual life of pleasure is suddenly shattered by her chance meeting with Baasie, her childhood 'black brother' at a conference in London attended by South African exiles, British journalists and others. Baasie's real name is Zwelinzima, meaning "suffering land". In other words, he embodies the sorrows and sufferings of his race and country. In the meeting Rosa can recognize him and wants to talk to him but his response has been cold and talked little. He is, in fact, offended when one of the exiles delivers a speech in memory of her father, Lionel Burger. He also takes offence at the fact that even Rosa attracts much attention as the daughter of the dead resistance hero. So, after returning from the conference, he telephones her at midnight and rebukes her bitterly. He asks her why her father should be admired so much or why she should be honoured. If her father, he continues, died in prison, so did dozens of black fathers. They were sick and dying like dogs. When they were old and could not work anymore, they were kicked out of the locations. "Getting old and dying in prison"(*BD* 328). Nobody talks about these blacks but everybody admires Lionel Burger as a hero because he is a white, Baasie alleges. Rosa repeatedly tries to establish their personal, subjective bond but fails. He rejects the bond because of the racial difference between them. Angered and disgusted Rosa retaliates with insults. A heated argument between them follows, which finally verges on racism.

After the conversation, Rosa stood in the middle of the room and then ran to the lavatory and vomited. This quarrel has a far reaching psychological impact on Rosa. She weeps for the severance of her personal relations. She reflects upon the incident and her life. She discovers some facts which help her decide to return to South Africa. She comes to accept the view of her father that the black men's political struggle would become racist if the whites did not support the African demand of majority rule. Secondly, she realises that she has to return to South Africa not because of any ideology but because of the suffering of the blacks. She comes to believe that suffering for a cause is better than a comfortable personal life and that no one defect from one's responsibility. Her sympathy

for others is revived. And hence returning to South Africa she takes up physiotherapy as profession –teaching crippled children to put one foot before another.

Baasie's anger may be said to be a result of his apartheid experiences which was quite traumatic. The praise of Lionel, the white revolutionary springs in him emotions that led him to target Rosa. On the other hand, Rosa evaluates her past only to get inspiration for the present. She realizes that the role of the whites in the changing circumstances cannot be the same as it was in the past. So coming back to South Africa, she redefines her relationship with her country by participating in the revolution instead of leading it. She is wounded and wounds help her make sense of the past event she has suffered. In other words, she becomes a resilient person. It is because of her resilience that she could revisit her own history. Therefore she realises that they had negotiated the position "their history books back home [South Africa] have ready for us –him bitter; me guilty. What other meeting place could there have been for us?"(*BD* 341) She is committed to find a place where both whites and blacks can live together. It is in order to continue her search for such a place that Rosa returns to South Africa. Rosa and therefore Gordimer know that it is located in the future, on the other side of a revolution that will overthrow apartheid.

Gordimer's tenth novel, *My Son's Story* (*MSS*) may be discussed in the light of the argument that narratives may have a therapeutic value. Published in 1990, the year that saw the released of Nelson Mandela and marked the beginning of the end of apartheid, *My Son's Story* tells the story of a father and his son. "It's an old story – ours. My father's and mine"(*MSS* 275). The novel opens with the fifteen-year old schoolboy, Will who bumps into his father, Sonny coming out of a cinema hall in the company of a white woman. This unexpected meeting has been a shattering moment for the schoolboy. His father's affair with a white woman, Hannah Plowman is not a common case of marital infidelity in the South Africa of 1980s when cross-racial relations was still a taboo. His father, Sonny is a dissident coloured teacher who turned revolutionary opposing the apartheid regime in South Africa. Will is shocked to see his father in the company of a white woman, so much so that he cannot tell his father the name of the film that he plans to watch. After this life changing discovery, he leaves the cinema hall and "took a bus home, home, home where I shut myself up in my room, safe among familiar schoolbooks" (*MSS* 5). Sonny's betrayal of his wife is a matter of utter disbelief

to his adolescent son Will. The unexpected event sends Will to silence. The memory of the scene keeps haunting his mind. He asks himself what made his father "allow himself to be seen with his woman" or what made him go there (*MSS* 29). Cathy Caruth observes that it is the unassimilated nature of trauma, the fact that the event was neither acknowledged nor experienced fully at the time, that later returns to haunt the survivor (cited in Herrero 105). Confusions and repetitions reverberate in Will's mind. In other words, as he cannot acknowledge the traumatic event at the first instance, it continues to haunt him as the narrative will reveal. He thinks that they should not have left their little house on the Reef and moved to the 'grey area' and settled in among whites. He is worried that he "did not know how to live now that I had met him [with his woman, Hannah], now that I had seen, not the movie I bunked swotting for, but what our own life" (*MSS* 37). Will feels that Sonny's betrayal constitutes a betrayal to the whole family –his wife Aila, his daughter Baby and his son Will. After the shocking event, Will becomes an accomplice to Sonny's secrets, unwillingly though. They behave as if nothing has happened. Will admits there is complicity between them. He regrets that his father drew him into the act of betrayal of his father. Sonny behaves in a way as if he was not his father because a father would never do such a thing. "And yet he was my father how could I resist, how could I dare refuse him?" (*MSS* 31). As an adolescent, he can understand Sonny's fascination for a 'blonde'. The blonde has been "wet dreams" for himself just as for all black men (*MSS* 4).Sonny is coloured but he aligns himself with the blacks, the narrator informs the reader. He realises that there is little difference between the blacks and the coloureds in their conditions of life. Will has a mixed feeling of admiration and jealousy for his father. But he cannot erase from his mind the memory of the betrayal. So the phrase like "Needing Hannah" comes to his mind repetitively (*MSS* 53, 68, 84). He uses again and again the sentence/thought "of course I know her" or its variation "we know each other" (*MSS* 14-15). Silvia Pellicer-Ortin points out that repetitions, digressions, dissociations, and recurrent use of images are some of the narrative techniques mentioned by the trauma critics such as Laurie Vickroy (83). As seen in the novel, the third person narrative voice often enters the narrative and makes digressions to present objective observations. Anyway, both the son and the father keep the secret to themselves. They, at least Will, do not want to hurt Aila, a beautiful and faithful wife and a loving and caring mother. This conspiracy of silence on the part of Will and Sonny establishes an uneasy bond between them. This gives rise to resentment

and restlessness in him. This results in the development of "Love or love/hate" experiences in Will, says he (*MSS* 275). He keeps the 'secret' of his father and keeps it secret from his mother and his sister with the intention of not hurting them. The secret of the shocking incident keeps haunting him for years and exerts a great impact on his life. And he is not only a keeper of the secret of his father but he turns out to be the keeper of history of the family. It is as if he attempts to overcome the shock through the art of narration. In other words, he is, in LaCapra's term, "acting out" to describe the process through which he is compelled to relive the traumatic event. This process may find expression through anxiety, unknown fears or repetition of the past event (cited in Notes 2 in Pellicer-Ortin, 85). Will narrates the story of his family and in the process develops a resilient nature in him.

The fact of the matter is that trauma in the context of South Africa is caused by the continuous damaging effects of apartheid laws. *My Son's Story* is not only about trauma of Will caused by his father's infidelity. It is also about the trauma of Aila and Baby, which is rooted in the apartheid structure of South Africa. Trauma critics like Michael Rothberg and Stef Craps argue for 'decolonising trauma theory'. They argue that the western trauma theories as developed by Cathy Caruth and others cannot explain adequately the complex situations in a country like South Africa. It is because the western concept of trauma mainly considers the trauma of an individual that arises from a single identifiable event, causing post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But trauma needs to be understood not only as a result of an identifiable event but also a consequence of a historical condition. In the case of South Africa, it is colonialism or, to be precise, apartheid. In their collection of essays, *Trauma, Memory and Narrative*, Mengel and Borzaga argue that in the context of South Africa trauma is inseparable from the history of apartheid which is the cause of collective trauma of several generations. Further, in her analysis of Mongane Wally Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981), Annie Gagiano writes that the strength of Serote's novel lies in its depiction of apartheid as "an invasive traumatizing presence in people's everyday life" and the novelist achieves it through the "affective dimensions", not through the presence of physical violence in the novel (Gagiano 232). The same may be said about Gordimer's *My Son's Story*. Sonny and his family are caught in the turmoil of anti-apartheid movements of 1980s. After Will's account of his encounter with Sonny at the cinema, the third person

narrative voice narrates in a flash back the early part of Sonny's life in Benoni, a coloured location. Gordimer shows how the rigid apartheid laws were in place in his early life. Sonny was a school teacher in a town in the east of Johannesburg. Nobody had recorded where his ancestors had come from as those generations did not "keep notes". The only documentation of their lives was their "*work-papers and the various, much-folded slips entitling them to be employed in the area, outside the town, designated by the municipality for their kind*" (original italics *MSS*, 5). The Group Areas Act of 1950 forced people of different races to live in segregated areas and helped the apartheid government effectively regulate the socio-political and economic life of the native Africans. Sonny resents his partial black identity and yearns to improve himself and his community. He is also upset with the inhuman, degraded life the non-whites have been leading as against the privileged life of the whites. A lover of Kafka and Shakespeare, Sonny has been the best teacher in the school and leading a comparatively comfortable life with his wife, Aila, who has been beautiful and an equally efficient housekeeper. However, as the cry for equality in the anti-apartheid movement intensifies and finally turns out to be a demand for freedom, Sonny shows his affinity with the 'real' blacks. The distinction between "black and real black, between himself and them" fades for the school teacher (*MSS* 25). His acquired sense of identity also finds echo in his coloured pupils' political defiance by way of boycotting classes in solidarity with the black school children. This may be seen as reminiscence of the 1976 Soweto Revolt of the school children who protested against the introduction Afrikaans as medium of instruction in the black schools. Sonny is impressed by the children's innocence act of identification with the black pupils. One day he decides to lead the children to "march across the veld to show solidarity with the children who had been locked out of their school by the police, after a boycott of classes; black solidarity" (*MSS* 27). Thus he draws the attention of the anti-apartheid activists who invite him to anti-apartheid activities such as campaigns against the removals of non-whites from the areas designated as 'white only'. In course of time he loses his job and becomes a regular speaker for the anti-apartheid movement. As Will says, he becomes a "full-time organizer" because the committee needed him (*MSS* 43). Thus the school teacher Sonny is transformed to Sonny the political personality. He moves to a white suburban area of Johannesburg for they cannot "accept their segregation" (*MSS* 41). Then he becomes a full-time political activist, involving himself in underground struggle for liberation in association with "the new black trade

unions" and "groups active against the government" (*MSS* 43). Thus the narrative confirms Clingman's observation that the black trade unions were allowed to be formed in the 1980s (201). This was also the period, as Gordimer states in "Living in the Interregnum", when there was a renewed call for the multi-racialism ant-apartheid co-operation among the races based on the tenets of the African National Congress (270).

However, in the course of his political activities, Sonny comes to know Hannah, a human rights activist working under the International Human Rights Commission when he has been in jail. Their relation blooms into an intense love affair when Sonny is released from the jail after a period of two-year imprisonment. He frequently disappears from his home to pursue both his underground activities and his clandestine sexual life with Hannah. In fact his immoral affair now turns out to be the locus of his underground works. Thus Gordimer has introduced the sexual relationship into the national politics. She seems to combine politics and sex, or sexualise politics as if both politics and sexuality are inter-related in the context of South Africa. As the son's narrative suggests, Sonny finds no distinction between his commitment to liberation struggle and his fascination for sexual pleasure. In "needing Hannah" Sonny's "sexual and political commitment were one," says Will (*MSS*, 125). They are often seen together exploring their public and private life. It seems that through their transgression of the racial barrier, they dedicate to the political struggle and concentrate on the ecstatic pleasure of love, which mutually intensify their passion. Sonny and Hannah's transgression in their love affair is in sharp contrast to Hillela's in *A Sport of Nature*. The Jewish woman Hillela involves with the blacks in political and sexual relationship as a revolutionary tactics for national liberation of South Africa, which makes significant contribution to the liberation struggle. But Sonny's immoral relation with Hannah finally does not come to any fruition. On the other hand, his illicit affair creates turmoil in his domestic life. His wife, son and daughter could not tolerate his immoral relationship with a white woman, the representative of the oppressor. So, his act of betrayal destroys the family. Will laments, "What a family he made of us." (*MSS* 62) He remembers how Sonny has been teaching them (Will and Baby) the value of respect. "Self-respect! It's been his religion, his godhead." (*MSS* 13) He is surprised how a man like Sonny can be attracted to a woman other than his wife. That too, the woman is a white by race. So Will expresses his anger and anxieties in the following passage:

> She is blonde, my father's woman. Of course. What else would she be? . . . . if *he* is to be caught of course it's going to be by the most vulgar, commonplace, shopworn of sticky traps, fit for a dirty fly that comes into the kitchen to eat our food and shit on it at the same time. (*MSS* 13-14)

Will's above reflection expresses his confusion and disgust at the moral downfall of his father. As upset he is with the event, it comes to his mind repetitively. This is reflected in his repetition of words, phrases and images, such as 'my father's woman', 'needing Hannah', 'family matters' and images like the 'carry all'. Drawing on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Judith Butler in his article, "The Pleasure of Repetition" says that repetition indicates the victim's inability to inhabit the present and that repetition expresses anger against the present. "In effect, repetition is associated with the re-presentation of the past, and hence, it indicates a way in which the ego fails to inhabit the present time" (273). Butler argues that the victim repeats words, scenes, etc. to repair the past. For Will the present is doubly painful because he is complicit in his father's affair, and thinks that he is deceiving his mother and sister. He feels helpless and frustrated. Nevertheless, he gets along with the deception. He tries to rationalise the psycho-sexual complex his father has shown, which is common to people of their kind, non-whites, including himself. "Of course she is blonde. The wet dreams I have, a schoolboy who's never slept with a woman, are blonde. It's an infection brought to us by the laws that have decided what we are, and what they are – the blonde ones (*MSS* 14). Thus while narrating his father's story, Will also represents his own evolving self. In the first person narration sections of the novel, Will tells his story with certain level of awareness because, as he claims, at fifteen he is no longer a child. Though not an adult yet, he is given the adult responsibility of keeping his father's secrets secret. This "clandestine knowledge immobilizes him, leaving him seething, resentful, and politically passive" (Levy 4). As Will moves toward adulthood, he acquires deep insight and knowledge of the intense anti-apartheid struggle capturing the suffering of the non-whites and the sacrifice of his family.

Will shows resilience to his traumatic experience by writing his autobiography and the biography of his father, Sonny. But Aila and Baby keep silent till they take the extreme steps. Both Will and Sonny have thought that Aila and Baby are not aware of Sonny's illicit affair with Hannah. Sonny remains absent from home and often for a long

time to carry on his anti-apartheid campaign as well as his frequent outings with Hannah. But both the mother and the daughter can see through his deception. Perhaps their female instincts tell them what is happening around them. They do not show any sign of its knowledge but keep up the appearance of a well-knit family. A stony silence envelops Aila and Baby. On the other hand, Will is drawn deeper in the 'secrets' of his father. He "could not evade being drawn further in" (*MSS* 84). Will is shocked when Baby takes the extreme step. She attempts to commit suicide by cutting her wrists but fails. Her failed attempt to commit suicide is a violent reaction to the traumatic event which she and her mother have to bear with so long. Will realises that his mother and sister knew the fact from the beginning. His mother tells him that Baby took drugs and that her great liveliness was nothing but result of deep unhappiness:

> She said to me: –What can we do for her? –
>
> The slight emphasis on 'we' gave away, all at once, that my mother knew about my father. That she knew – without knowing how – I knew. . . .What could we do for my sister: a family that ours had become? And at the same moment it came to both of us: what Baby's 'deep unhappiness' that the doctor diagnosed was about. (*MSS* 61)

Sonny may turn a blind eye to the family. But Aila and Baby respond, though silently, and assert their political agency. After recovering from her failed suicide attempt, Baby turns a revolutionary and leaves the country along with her lover whom she marries abroad. They work in exile in a neighbouring African country for the refugees. Aila silently joins the arms wing of the ANC –Umkhonto we Sizwe –without the knowledge of the father and the son. She works for it locally in the Johannesburg area. Consequently Aila is arrested and charged with terrorism under the Internal Security Act (*MSS* 233). Will is surprised how the graceful lady of the home transformed herself into a revolutionary. He regrets that unlike his father he has been present on two most critical moments in the history of the family: Baby's suicide attempt and Aila's arrest. When the white police officers come to their home, Will opens the door for them who subsequently arrest Aila. He thought they have come for Sonny. But to his utter surprise, they arrested Aila. He is overcome with grief and rage. He runs to the house of Hannah in search of Sonny who has been away on the usual holiday with Hannah. He recounts

> I went to kill him that night.
>
> I was the one who opened the door to her jailers. I was the one who could have died. (*MSS* 207)

This is a reflection of his anger against his father and also for his being left out in the liberation struggle. As he relates, his father is the famous Sonny, Baby is the revolutionary in exile, and Aila becomes an accomplice of Umkhonto we Sizwe. They are the "family's sacrifice for the people, there is no need of me, who needs someone like me" (*MSS* 251)? So towards the end of the novel, Will releases his repressed anger which is both a reproach to Aila and a self-accusation as well. He regrets that he is left out and that he has not played any role in the liberation struggle. He further continues

> when I can act like the rest of you, when I can face them in court and tell them they're liars, liars, those thugs who've been let into our house –I let them in, I'm the one who's let every kind of destruction into our house, I'm always there, handy, Will is going to do it, . . . It's enough! I have enough of it! – (*MSS* 254-55)

The above passage is an expression of Will's frustration and self-accusation which a trauma victim suffers from. He regrets that he is an insider –insider to the family and to the secret of his father. And yet he has to act as an outsider. The situation is like that of Gordimer herself who has been a white activist, opposing apartheid in South Africa like any other black artist. But she has often faced criticism for being white. However, Will is angry at his presence at home at the crucial moments while his father has been absent. Now he can prove his presence in the family by acting in a certain way in the court. But his mother does not want him to be mixed up in this (*MSS* 254). As Lital Levy points out, he has sometimes imitated and sometimes played a foil to his father. And this "has castrated Will, such that his Oedipal rage appears almost over-determined. At the same time, political, sexual, and *authorial* agency are conjoined in the novel's economy" (original italic, Levy 5). In the middle of the narrative, he informs the reader that he has "a little girl" of his own. She is very nice and very fond of him. He sleeps with her at her place, or sometimes in the room of one of her friends. Just like his father, "his sex life has no home" (*MSS* 184-85). He calls his girlfriend a "little girl" of his own. But at the same time he recognizes her as an "intelligent" and "progressive" girl who has about the "same build" as his mother. "Thus, claiming his sexual agency Will mimics his father by

choosing a girlfriend who obviously replicates his mother yet who also stands in doubly for Hannah, the secret lover who refutes domestic sexuality." (Levy 5)

The novel begins with the first person narrative voice of Will and alternates with third person narrative voice. As in *Burger's Daughter*, Gordimer uses in *My Son's Story* free direct speech as a device to move easily between the two narrative voices. According to Clingman, the narrative structure of the novel has a deceptive duality. Till the end, there are two narratives. The first one is a "feigned third-person narrative of Sonny (and the others), by Will; the second is a first-person narrative, by Will, in feigned ignorance of the other one" (xxix). The narrative begins as an autobiography in which the son tells the story of his father's infidelity: "How did I find out? / I was deceiving him" (*MSS* 3). Will's statement that he is deceiving his father is double edged. Ironically it also suggests the father's deception which becomes clear as the narrative progresses. Thus, Will begins narrating the story of his father, and in doing so he tells his own story – the story of his becoming a writer for which he feels that he should thank his father. "Do I have to thank him for that" (*MSS* 277)? He is not sure. Whether or not he thanks his father, he admits one thing that he is a writer. He claims:

> In our story, like all stories, I've made up what I wasn't there to experience myself. Sometimes –I can see –I've told something in terms I wouldn't have capable of, aware of, at the period when it was happening: the licence of hindsight of hindsight. . . . *Sometimes memory has opened a trapdoor and dropped me back into the experience as if I were living it again just at the stage I was when I lived it, so I've told it that way, in the present tense*. (italics original, *MSS* 275)

As the above reflection reveals, Will's memory often takes back to his past experiences. He has to relive them again to relate in the present. His or their family story is the product of his frequent backward reflection and projection of his memories into the present. The present is replaced with this story/fiction with all its gaps and incoherence. In the Introduction to their book, *The Unspeakable*, Nevine El Nossery and Amy L. Hubbell observe that trauma narratives are by nature incomplete and full of gaps and inconsistencies. Citing Kathrin Robson, they further say that in the process of narrative memories often get modified and fictionalized: "the narrativization of trauma is curative

not because they conveys 'what happened' but because it modifies it, because it represents the past in a less disturbing fashion." (cited in Nossery and Hubbell, 10) Sonny, a lover of Shakespeare, also wanted his son to be a writer. By writing the story of their family in the apartheid South Africa, Will writes his first book. He writes the story of his family and by doing so he frees himself from his present conundrums. He wrote a poem for his father, who has been jailed again. He is not sure whether or not the poem will be given to his father. The poem highlights the images of bird and dove, which may be seen as symbolizing freedom as against the iron bars and stone walls of the prison. He calls upon friends, lovers, and comrades to struggle for the liberation from the white supremacy. Gordimer seems to identify here with Will in terms of her own position as a writer and a witness within the contemporary South Africa. In the paragraphs preceding his poem he reports that Sonny's comrades thought he (Sonny) was not the man he had been. But Will claims that now it is his time with woman and politics. He will record what his father, mother, sister and others did, "what it really was like to live a life determined by the struggle to be free" (*MSS* 276). This is what he does in his "first book" which he cannot publish (*MSS*, 277). If this is his first, the reader can expect more books from this young author. By announcing himself as the author, Will seems to assert his voice that will challenge the hegemonic system in a language it can recognize. Gordimer takes the epigraph of the novel from Shakespeare's Sonnet XIII: "You had a father, let your son say so", which suggests a transition. But in this transition from "the father to this South African Will", Clingman points out, Gordimer envisages "a shift in the claims of politics and fiction" in the post-apartheid South Africa (xxxi).

Will claims to author the novel in which he combines personal and historical memories. The description of the cleansing of the graves scene may be taken as a fine example of the historical fact. This scene shows the blacks and the whites coming together. The cleansing of the graves ceremony is held in a black township in honour of the nine South African young men who were shot dead by the police. The various anti-apartheid white groups participated in the ceremony after initial opposition by the police. But the government forces disperse the multiracial crowed adopting brutal measures, killing another man. The event shows the violence and death that marked the anti-apartheid movements in the 1980s. Sonny is the main speaker and his speech echoes Mandela's words during his Rivonia trial (Uledi-Kamanga 148). Further, as Dominic

Head says this episode highlights Gordimer's concern with what Foucault called heterotopia –a site of difference and resistance. Head illustrates the point with reference to the black township where blacks and whites mix up for the graveyard ceremony. As the convoy of white lawyers and civil rights leaders reaches the overpopulated black township, they are greeted by multitudes of blacks. The blacks run towards the convoy and stand on either side of the road. Initially the white visitors fear the massive presence of blacks. But their fear soon changes into joy when the blacks extend their hands to welcome the whites. Hannah opened the window beside her. She found that instead of stones, black hands came forward and touched first her hands and then those of all who were inside the van(*MSS* 108). This handshaking affirms the human oneness. This is further seen in the graveside ceremony itself. Barriers between races are broken as the whites and the blacks mix freely. While narrating the free mixing, Gordimer highlights the economic and social differences between the whites and blacks. She points out the extreme poverty in which the blacks live. The blacks have developed over the years the habit of living in close proximity. They were accustomed to travel in overcrowded buses and trains. It was almost normal that a large family living together in a single room. But when they gathered in the graveyard

> the people from the combis were dispersed from one another and spatial aura they instinctively kept, and pressed into a single, vast, stirring being with the people of the township. . . One ultimate body of bodies was inhaling and exhaling in the single diastole and systole, and above was the freedom of the great open afternoon. (*MSS* 110)

This passage may be said to symbolically represent a space of black urbanization, which is different from and yet connected to other sites in South Africa. As depicted in the passage, there is a "spatial repression" to create "the possibility of a community, an integrated body politic". This community of "proximity" shows a "vitality" which is foreign to "the privileged whites who are, nevertheless, soon infected by its sense of possibility" (*MSS* 156). The passage represents an image of unity among the races, suggesting the possibility of a new nation. But this vision of an alternative future vanishes in the chaotic break-up of the protest. By the end of the novel, Will relates that the whites warned them – the blacks and the communists – to leave the area and burnt their house in the white suburb area under Group Areas Act of 1950. Seeing the house

being burnt, he screamed: *This is my father's house*. (*MSS* 272) Though he has an uneasy relationship with his father, the destruction of the house brought back the old love and admiration of his father. Both the father and the son visited to inspect the destroyed house which lost all its markers separating the kitchen, the sitting-room, Sonny's room, etc. The destruction of their house reminds Will of the destruction that Sonny brought into the family: "The smell of destruction, of what has been consumed, that he first brought into that house." (*MSS* 274) Sonny, on the other hand, reacted angrily and said that they cannot be burnt out. He compares them (the black and the coloured) to the called phoenix which rises from the ashes again and again. He claims that the whole country is theirs, not only the area they live in. Perhaps, Will refers to this bird, phoenix in his poem discussed in the last paragraph.

The end of *My Son's Story* reminds the reader of *The Lying days*. Like Will, Helen Shaw finds that she has written a novel as the "product of her experience" (Clingman, xxxi). However, Shaw is white but Will is a male and 'coloured', which suggests a development of a cultural tradition. Clingman further observes it is an irony that, unlike Helen Shaw, Will cannot publish his novel. This is perhaps because of censorship or because "the book relates more directly to the period of repression before 1990 than to the one that opened up after" (xxxii). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Mengel and Borzaga argued that trauma in South Africa is a product of the history of apartheid, which has caused the collective traumatization of several generations.

My Son's Story continues to address some of the issues and themes of Gordimer's earlier fiction such as cross racial relations, public and private life, and also function of literature. Gordimer's choice of a coloured family in this novel shows her preoccupation with the politics of race, gender and resistance to apartheid. Sonny, the 'coloured' teacher and his family are located in an ambivalent position. They have certain advantage when compared with the blacks and yet segregated from the whites. Socio-political conditions of the 'coloured' people in South Africa coloured their identity with hybridity and fluidity. Their 'ambivalence' and 'in-betweenness' provide them with possibilities of transformation. As Homi Bhabha observes in *The Location of Culture* social differences are "signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project" (3). Bhabha further says,

> 'Beyond' signifies spatial distance, marks progresses, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary –the very act of going *beyond* --are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the 'present' which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced. (original italics, 4-5)

Sonny's 'coloured' family symbolically marks progress to an uncertain future when they move from the coloured location in their hometown to a 'grey area' in the city of Johannesburg where people of their kind defied the apartheid laws and "settled in among whites" (*MSS* 14). The committee offered Sonny a house to settle among whites in defiance of the Group Areas Act. Gordimer seems to suggest that the movement of the 'coloured' family into the grey area of the city signals the movement 'beyond' borders and barriers. This also suggests the notion of the 'coloured' identity as hybrid and in-between. By living in the borderland space between the white community and the black location across the veld, they move beyond the barriers of colour and transgress the limits of social and cultural space in their efforts of resistance to segregation.

Secondly, the coloured family's movement into the white city also marks the beginning of an uncertain future of the family in South Africa. This is realised by Sonny's son Will and his wife Aila as well. Sonny actively involved himself in politics after the School uprisings and led the family into a 'grey area' of South African politics in which the future is uncertain. Will perceives this as uprooting and dislocation of the family. He can understand that a "changing vocabulary was accompanying the transformation of Sonny to 'Sonny' the political personality" (*MSS* 39). Aila knew that he was leading her into a "different life" about which she was not sure that she could follow. Even Sonny understood that "a certain shelter was being given up, for the family. Shabby, degrading shelter –but nevertheless" (*MSS* 39). Sonny's family has been in a borderline situation and the movement of the family signifies the flux or ambivalence into the unpredictable future. Through the relocation of the 'coloured' identity, Gordimer appears to suggest the family's cultural mixture that may produce new meanings and possibilities. According to Clingman, Gordimer's use of 'coloured' family to unfold the history of apartheid South Africa through the voice of a coloured narrator is a "symbolic choice of narrative identity, representing some identification on Gordimer's part with a new and developing world" (xxvii). Gordimer suggests the potential of the coloured

family and even her own writing to move beyond the apartheid system and become the locations of culture.

Another major theme of the novel is the issue of sex and politics. Gordimer's treatment of gender is taken in the next chapter. However, it may be mentioned here that Sonny's betrayal has a traumatic effect on both his daughter, Baby and his wife Aila. In the case of Baby, the reaction is visible when she attempts to commit suicide. Otherwise she is silent throughout the novel. The reader can know her internal as well external life through the narrative voice of Will. Even Aila's life is mediated through Will. Through his interracial relationship with Hannah and his underground political activities, Sonny becomes a site for exploring the relationship of sex and politics. And this, in turn, helps Gordimer explore the social realities of South Africa of the time. Sonny's betrayal, on the other hand, creates uncertainties and doubts in the family. Aila becomes a revolutionary under the cover of her daughter to overcome the traumatic experience resulting from her husband's betrayal. Aila moves beyond the traditional gender identity as a dependant wife and caring mother, and emerges with the new identity of a revolutionary in the later part of the novel.

Will takes recourse to narrative to give expression to his traumatic experiences, Aila joins the political struggle and her engagement is independent of her husband. She transcends her past and achieves a new identity which is as subversive as any man's. Gordimer here makes a distinctive progress form her earlier heroines by portraying Aila as an active revolutionary and by portraying a 'coloured' woman in the role of revolutionary.

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