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## Gordimer's rendition of the picaresque in *A Sport of Nature*

### Abstract

*The aim of this article is twofold: firstly, to explore the picaresque elements present in Nadine Gordimer's A Sport of Nature and secondly, to relate them to her more pronounced stance on feminism which has evolved since the 1980s. I suggest that an appropriate reading strategy would not only foreground these issues but also highlight A Sport of Nature as one of her most underrated novels. Following the example of the Latin American authors Isabel Allende and Elena Poniatowska, Gordimer has appropriated the picaresque tradition as an ideal vehicle to depict the elements of social critique and feminist assertion which characterize A Sport of Nature. The ironic retrospective stance on society, conventionally represented by a pícaro as a social outcast, is reinforced by the introduction of a pícaro, thereby underlining the double marginalization of women as subjects and sexual objects. I propose that a feminist-oriented reading of the text which recognizes this subversive quality, would lend a different dimension to its interpretation. The character of Hillela serves as an implicit example of female ingenuity which attains political equality through devious means despite, and as a result of, the constraints of a hypocritical society and an entrenched patriarchal system. Seen from this perspective, the seemingly disparate elements of the novel coalesce to present a damning picture of contemporary society.*

### 1. Historical awareness: a dialectic between text and context

#### 1.1 The evolution of the picaresque tradition

This article explores Nadine Gordimer's innovative appropriation of the picaresque mode in *A Sport of Nature* and proposes that it can be related to her more pronounced stance on feminism, which has evolved since the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The argument is based on the close relationship between literary convention or mode and context (Fowler, 1985) and it underlines the interactive role of these elements in the interpretation of a text. I suggest that Gordimer's historical awareness which has always been effectively illustrated in her work as a dialectic between text and context, is accentuated in *A Sport of Nature* by the use of the picaresque mode. The introduction of this mode and in particular the pícaro, would presumably then also correlate with a change in her political perspective and consequently

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<sup>1</sup> Although Gordimer's ambivalent attitude makes it difficult to define her stance, various critics (Driver, 1983; Clingman, 1986 and Lazar, 1990) comment on definite signs of female sympathy and an evolution of gender issues or the politicisation of sexuality in her work.

indicate an adjustment in the reading strategy of *A Sport of Nature*. Wicks (1974:241) stresses the role of mode in any interpretation when he claims that

modal awareness readjusts our expectations of the individual modes themselves by making us see the way a particular work makes use of - and changes - those very expectations.

Fowler (1985:259) also cautions that awareness of mode not only prevents mis-interpretation but also enhances meaning and expands the reader's perception and interpretation of a text. Consequently, an exploration of picaresque elements should pave the way for a more definitive interpretation of the above-mentioned text.

The evolution of the picaresque tradition in the literature of sixteenth century Spain was a manifestation of and a reaction to the unstable social and political conditions. However, its universal and ironic tone of social critique has since made it an ideal vehicle to expose corrupt social practices at various times and in various contexts. Several adaptations of the picaresque have intermittently emerged in Western literature and have been designated as "neo-picaresque" (Jaen, 1987), "metamorphosis" (Earle, 1988) or "mutant" (Brink, 1990) versions of the mode, but their inherent 'picaresque character' has remained recognizable, namely, the first-person retrospective account of the aimless peregrinations of an alienated individual in a hostile society.

Eustis (1984:163) stresses the relevance of the picaresque as a narrative model in gauging or interpreting contemporary political situations, particularly in Spanish politics, when he claims that

Studies of what is often perceived as a revival of the picaresque mode in contemporary literature tend to focus on the translation into modern terms of traditional picaresque structural and thematic motifs, stressing especially the archetypal features, the broad satirical elements and the philosophical implications of neo-picaresque narrative. Largely ignored has been any consideration of the ideological underpinnings of such works, of the key role politics frequently has played in determining their form and function as an expression of present-day concerns.

This statement once again illustrates the close relationship between social environment/politics and literature which is also characteristic of South African literature and Gordimer in particular.<sup>2</sup> Her initial intention as committed author to project "history from the inside",<sup>3</sup> has gradually evolved to encompass a much broader spectrum of social issues. Her intention has namely changed from a personal/political perspective to a universal vision of man in/and society. To accommodate this vision she has adopted recognizable picaresque "structural and thematic motifs" (Eustis, 1984:163) but the initial satirical intent has been reinforced by her depiction of woman as a *pícara* with all the concomitant implications.

The emergence of the picaresque in contemporary women's fiction from Latin America and South Africa introduces an interesting new dimension to the nature and interpretation of the mode. The picaresque is used mainly as a subversive strategy to assert feminist

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<sup>2</sup> Parker (1989:210) regards "her exploration, from the outset, of the relation between history and literature, especially fiction" as one of Gordimer's predominant features.

<sup>3</sup> Clingman (1986:1) refers to Gordimer's preoccupation with individual experience in society as an attempt to render "history from the inside".

experience and to counter/expose patriarchal and imperialist domination.<sup>4</sup> In Eustis's (1984:167) terms, it provides the ideal framework "for an ideologically charged denunciation of contemporary society".

## 1.2 Gordimer's revised political scenario

In keeping with the changing political climate, Nadine Gordimer's sustained criticism of the South African political system has shown a steady evolution over the years, both in her political opinions and in her particular concern with the integral relationship between private and public (Clingman, 1986:8). Her disillusionment with liberal humanism, similar to E.M. Forster's in *A Passage to India*, has introduced a more revolutionary stance in her recent writing<sup>5</sup> which has perhaps inadvertently also focused her attention on different aspects of marginalization<sup>6</sup> and in particular, the plight of women. Like Forster, she has come to realize that personal relationships are incapable of resolving racial barriers and social inequality. Peck (1988:79) accurately describes the quality of her disenchantment with liberalism when he remarks that "in recent years Gordimer has evidently seen her political task as puncturing the delusions of South Africa's liberals and proposing more efficacious and more committed alternatives". I would like, however, to suggest that Gordimer's revised political scenario as illustrated in *A Sport of Nature* involves a more universal and perhaps philosophic view on human relations. Her choice of the picaresque mode confirms this opinion because it implies a basic distrust of human nature and an awareness of the pernicious influence of power. She realises that a transfer of power would merely result in a reverse situation. As Alexander (1988:237) correctly observes, she is too intelligent to fall into the trap of "believing that people are ever all good or all evil, or the error of imagining that political systems can be better than their creators". The implications of this statement will be discussed in the conclusion of this article.

This different emphasis in her work has induced Gordimer to consider a more appropriate strategy which would convey the underlying irony of the South African political situation but, at the same time, underline the oppression of women within that society. In this

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<sup>4</sup> According to the definition of the contemporary women's picaresque proposed in this article, the following novels could be accommodated by such a definition: *Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende (1989), *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1984) by Elena Poniatowska, *A Sport of Nature* (1987) by Nadine Gordimer and, with qualifications, *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (1979) by Elsa Joubert.

<sup>5</sup> Driver (1983:30) comments on Gordimer's shift from an "uneasy liberalism to a recognition of the marginality of liberalism and of its inherent hypocrisies, and finally into a 'revolutionary' attitude" in her novels since 1970 while Parker (1989:214) remarks that her novels "have shown a trajectory of increasing radicalisation".

<sup>6</sup> Parker (1989:220) accurately interprets the theme of marginality but he ignores the crucial feminist aspect when he proposes that:

Gordimer's novel becomes, then, an exercise in the exploration of the margin itself, and if such a reading becomes remotely tenable, the novel becomes an exploration, not of success, but of failure: failure of all the old-established patterns of answers for the future; failure of prescribed meanings; failure of the very notion of what constitutes a border, whether in politics, or with reference to gender, or colour. The 'sport of nature' is therefore no longer the 'spontaneous mutation' or the 'new variety' of the dictionary definition, but a transgressor - one who not only breaks the 'rules' but one who even seeks to redefine the 'limits' themselves.

respect, the picaresque mode proves eminently suitable as a medium of critique on contemporary social and political circumstances and it is especially appropriate as a distancing device<sup>7</sup> which differs from the conventional realist approach previously favoured by Gordimer. The ironic retrospective stance of the pícaro emphasizes distance and stresses the fictional quality of a 'restructured past'. Similar to Allende, who introduces a male perspective through Rolf's story in *Eva Luna*, Gordimer has also introduced a male stance in the person of Sasha and his letters in *A Sport of Nature*. This underlines the duality of male and female experience and the unreliability of a unilateral perspective.

It must be emphasized however, that the focalization operative in the contemporary women's picaresque is much more complex than in the traditional version. It constitutes and merits a separate study to fully appreciate the complementary male/female perspectives which have evolved concomitantly with the traditional juxtaposition of temporal frameworks operative within the autobiographical stance of the pícaro in such works as *Eva Luna* and *A Sport of Nature*. Although Parker (1989:211) interprets the italic script in *A Sport of Nature* as a visual representation of the metalanguage, he sees it as a negative mechanism which "confers opacity in certain key sections in which it occurs" (Parker, 1989:216) and he does not recognize Sasha's role in the dual perspective represented in the discourse. This dual perspective proves an effective device in some of the contemporary women's picaresque and constitutes, together with the more pronounced emotional involvement of the pícaras, a significant adaptation to the mode.

Taking these facts into consideration, I believe that the criticism evoked by Gordimer's novel *A Sport of Nature* could perhaps be ascribed to a disregard of the subversive tone and thematic concerns introduced by the picaresque mode in the text. It seems as if Gordimer's established reputation as a 'realist' novelist has induced readers and critics alike to become oblivious of any nuances and strategies in her work. Such a situation could result in a 'petrification' of reading patterns, which would entail the rejection of apparently incongruous devices and strategies to finally result in misinterpretation. Parker (1989:210) astutely observes that Gordimer provides "a clue to the title and thereby also the focus through which the reader observes" but he is not sufficiently alert to the underlying nuances in the text.

### 1.3 Contemporary picaresque and political/historical reality

It is singular that although the presence of picaresque elements is mostly recognized (Glenn, 1986:76; De Kock, 1988:47; Parker, 1989:217), their significance is not related to the interpretation of the text. This observation could account for frequent criticism of the style and, inexplicably, the deficiency of irony in the text. For example, Glenn (1986:76) claims:

Gordimer's artistic risk is that in writing these sexual chronicles largely without any focus on or concern with the consciousness of the protagonist herself and without the resources of irony or

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<sup>7</sup> Peck (1988:75) acknowledges that Gordimer "proposes a new alternative which faces the demands of power more squarely" in *A Sport of Nature*, but he accuses her of ambivalence when he maintains that "she so distances herself from the new approach that it is not clear whether she has endorsed it or condemned it". This strategy is, however, consistent with the open ending of the text and Gordimer's universal perspective.

hindsight, the novel could (and sometimes does) turn into a twentieth century version of Byron's *Don Juan* without the humour.

De Kock (1988:46) in turn, pronounces it to be "something of a freak child among the author's impressive fictional progeny" and claims that it falls "uncomfortably between whimsy, historical realism and optimistic political prognosis". As this judgement seems to discount the close association of the contemporary picaresque with political and historical reality as well as the presence of an inherent cynicism which is depicted in the ironical stance of the pícaro, it would justify his allegation that it is an "unemotional ... presentation of personal experience" (De Kock, 1988:46). Abrahams (1988/89:29) also seems to fall into the 'traditional' trap when he denounces *A Sport of Nature* as "Nadine Gordimer's poorest novel", accuses her of bad style and dismisses satire as a motivating principle in her work by claiming that "readers of Gordimer will know this is not the way she works; she is no Evelyn Waugh; satire is not the mode of her seriousness" (Abrahams, 1988/89:28). Despite his perceptive observations on the text, Parker (1989:220) also fails to detect the ironical edge to Gordimer's treatment of liberal characters such as Pauline and Joe when he claims that their level of discussion is unsophisticated and "tends to culminate in slogans and clichés". It is Gordimer's implicit intention that these people should appear to be "politically emasculated" (Parker, 1989:220). In fact, Parker's analysis is consistent with the universal picaresque/feminist intent of the text but he is misled by the author's established reputation in political engagement. Similarly, the title acquires an ironic dimension when it becomes clear from a perusal of the text, that the society in which Hillela appears a freak, has decidedly questionable norms itself.

In contrast with the above-mentioned, Alexander (1988:221) expresses his appreciation of Gordimer's "ironic treatment of her characters, which, shading as it occasionally does into outright satire, allows her to manipulate our view of her protagonists". This manipulative aspect is overlooked in most of the relevant criticism.

Gordimer's acute awareness of history and context should therefore act as a constant guideline in the interpretation of her work. In the preface to his book on Gordimer, Clingman (1986:ix), who has conducted a thorough chronological study of Gordimer's work, emphasizes the importance of interaction between author, context and reader in her work:

One must consider fiction in its specificities; one must develop a sound knowledge of political and historical contexts; one must continually think of the relations between these and literature; one must be aware of the various currents, historical, social, cultural and ideological, in which fiction is borne along, and whose presence it reveals.

Gordimer (1988[1979]:136) herself is also very aware of change, the perception of social consciousness and the role of the writer in society. She claims:

'Relevance' and 'commitment' are conceptualizations of this movement. They become the text claimed by artists who, individually, understand different things by them; they also become the demands made upon the artist by his people. Relevance and commitment pulse back and forth between the artist and society.

These statements once again stress the relevance of social and historical context in Gordimer's work. The implication is that in as much as the author feels a responsibility to

interpret experience, the reader has a responsibility to translate or decode it within the relevant context.

## 2. Gordimer and feminism

In her commitment to social and political issues, Nadine Gordimer had never considered the plight of women as worthy of particular attention until recently. In a statement made in the seventies, Nadine Gordimer professed that she regarded all writers "as androgynous beings" (Gordimer, 1988:113)<sup>8</sup> thereby implying the irrelevance of feminist issues. In her opinion women's rights were subsumed under the liberation struggle and therefore irrelevant as a distinctive cause<sup>9</sup>. This stance would explain why she assumed feminism to be a manifestation of white and female bourgeois ideology and regarded it as a concept which could be summarily dismissed (Lazar, 1990:102). When Roberts (1983:45) observes that the focus in Gordimer's portrayal of women is not so much "on their status as women but on the moral validity of action as women in various circumstances in an overall political ambience" she accurately assesses her stance. Yet, as a "social participant in what she observes" (Clingman, 1986:2) and as a woman herself, it seems inevitable that she would eventually have to address the plight of women as a marginalized group in society. This opinion is substantiated by Driver (1983:30) when she asserts that Gordimer's shift to a gender-related political stance has influenced her views on women and racism. It also seems possible that the increasing emphasis on gender issues and the emergence of black feminism during the last few years have contributed to her recognition of the validity of women's claims.

Due to Gordimer's ambivalence on feminist issues it is difficult to gauge her stance, but already in the early 1980s Driver (1983:36) cautions that Gordimer's views on sexuality should not be seen "as simplistic or accidental" because they represent an implicit exploration of racism as a social issue which makes it analogous to sexual oppression. Driver (1983:37) argues that

if she draws on sexuality as a common bond between men and women, she draws on gender identity as a common bond between women; she also explores through sexuality the notion of a private life, so complex a concept in South African society, and she is able to set up a reverberating metaphorical relation between sexism and racism that has important implications regarding her political stance.

Clingman (1986:105) draws a direct correlation between sexuality and politics in Gordimer's more recent novels when he states that

sexuality is becoming politicized, as political engagement takes on a definite sexual quality. And with increasing force, as we shall see in *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People*, Gordimer's women become interlocked with politics, as politics transforms sexuality.

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<sup>8</sup> Driver (1983:33) reacts to this statement by claiming that Gordimer surely intended that "all writers (like all people) *ought to be* androgynous". She claims that the "feminist impulse" has always been implicitly present in Gordimer's fiction and that her rejection is directly related to the colonial context.

<sup>9</sup> Driver (1983:33) refers to Gordimer's conviction that white colonial women share the blame with men where racism is concerned. She states that "Gordimer's fiction is also addressed towards white South African women in a way that draws them into the circle of blame and responsibility", and she further suggests that this attitude must be taken into consideration when Gordimer's stance on the "political issues of race and sex" are considered.

This transformation shows a movement away from the personal towards the public. Lazar (1990:104) also comments that Gordimer's "variation in approach to sexual questions makes it difficult to read her stories either as feminist or as anti-feminist representations, and this ambiguity of interpretation is heightened by her frequent use of the ironical voice". However, this ironical tone is crucial in the interpretation of *A Sport of Nature* because it not only carries an implicit critique of society, but it also implicates the reader. The conflicting attitudes towards different forms of oppression expressed in *A Sport of Nature* are not necessarily endorsed by Gordimer but must rather be seen as a refutation of power politics.

## 2.1 Gordimer's female protagonists

The female protagonists in *July's People*, *Burger's Daughter* and *A Sport of Nature* struggle to establish a personal and social identity in a male-dominated revolutionary society. They all show courage and quiet determination to oppose racial and social inequality, although in different measures and by different means. Maureen Smales, Rosa Burger and Hillela Capran all make conscious choices which reflect negatively on their male relatives, ironically undercut their apparent freedom of choice and emphasize their social limitations.

The anonymity of the above-mentioned titles is indicative of the protagonists' lack of identity as women. Maureen Smales finds life as a woman in July's rural community intolerable and she escapes to an unknown future, perhaps even death. The implicit critique of the male society in *Burger's Daughter* is continued in *A Sport of Nature* through Hillela's consciousness, illustrating the effects of a male-dominated society on women's lives. Rosa Burger, whose whole life has been overshadowed by her father's political affiliations, has to choose between being a mistress and being imprisoned on the presumption that she has inherited her father's political convictions. The political supersedes the personal. Clingman (1986:171) acknowledges that "Rosa's career is measured out in the novel in relation to that of her father" but he does not explore the implications of this fact in the interpretation of the novel. Ironically, Rosa has a tragic limitation of choice: to become a mistress would imply resignation to her conventional role as a woman and to become politically engaged would imply conforming to the precept set by her father. Yet her choice signifies a conscious bid for equality in the struggle for a common cause, "in becoming socially and historically committed" (Clingman, 1986:179). Both Driver (1983:34) and Breen (1990:117) comment on the significance of Rosa's return to South Africa. As Breen (1990:117) explains, it indicates an implicit rejection of the idea that love is "sufficient for moral happiness" and she claims that

through Rosa, who ends up in prison for supposed political subversion of the State, women are shown as having a moral obligation to face the truth about themselves and the culture in which they live, and to act accordingly.

Visel (1988:40) also makes an interesting connection between this incident and the theme, when he states that "going to jail is a paradoxical form of liberation, as the novel's refrain, an ironic dialogue between prison and freedom, makes us aware".

Hillela Capran, in *A Sport of Nature*, is more subtle in her choice. She manages to gain political power through her alternate roles of mistress and wife. Her choice of apparent subjugation is in fact a bid for power, the only possibility for a woman forced to obey the rules of a man's game. Hillela illustrates Driver's (1983:35) contention "that new political experience is accessible to a young woman primarily through participation in a male world, and to this world she can have access most easily through sexual communion" but the difference lies in her deliberate manipulation of male susceptibility. She attains recognition, although through devious means – ironically endorsed by society – and in her struggle we observe a steady progression towards an accepted equality between the sexes.

It is then apparent that the expansion of her parameters has made Gordimer aware of other pertinent issues and social minorities, that the position of women has inadvertently become an important issue in her writing. In *A Sport of Nature* she uses the picaresque mode in a vein reminiscent of Latin American authors Elena Poniatowska and Isabel Allende. In their work (*Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and *Eva Luna* respectively) as in Gordimer's, the picaresque is used as social critique of a corrupt society in general, but the introduction of a pícaro instead of a pícaro as the victim of society is a change in the traditional role and serves as a subtle but undeniable emphasis of the marginal condition of the female protagonist. It is this extremely ironical aspect of *A Sport of Nature* which Parker (1989:210) fails to appreciate. He acknowledges that the novel represents a variation on the 'classic realist text' which needs to be accounted for and refers to Hillela's "picaresque adventures" (Parker, 1989:217) but he fails to relate the individual's plight to the fact that she is a woman who is confronted with a personal/political dilemma. A female-oriented reading of the text reveals this underlying but potent irony as the main thrust of social critique.

### 3. The picaresque defined

Although the first picaresque text is generally accepted to be *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades* published in 1544 by an anonymous author, it was only identified as such when another seminal text, entitled *La vida de Guzmán de Alfarache, atalaya de la vida* (1559 & 1604), was published in two parts by Mateo Alemán. These two texts established the picaresque tradition and constituted a frame of reference for Cervantes's *Don Quijote* (1605). In reaction to the romances of chivalry, the picaresque introduced an anti-hero in the persona of the pícaro/pícaro. Lazarillo, who serves as norm in this discussion, is the traditional rogue anti-hero who is an anonymous, destitute outcast of society. His lack of identity is stressed by his lack of a family name – his name was acquired from the river Tormes beside which he was born. He has no relations, no education or profession and he drifts from master to master. In his aimless progress he is abused and exploited and in turn learns to apply the same measures for survival. The tale is recounted in retrospect, from an apparently respectable position within society, and is intended to justify his past misdemeanours. This concept of the rogue hero is slightly changed in *Don Quijote* where Cervantes explores the illusory and deceptive effects of fiction representing the anti-hero as an outcast instead of a rogue. However, the ironic plight of the pícaro/pícaro becomes a general indictment of social hypocrisy which implicates the reader as part of society. This element of social critique characterizes most of the future adaptations of the mode.



The identification of texts pertaining to the picaresque has always been a controversial issue and it is likely to remain one, judging from the disparate opinions still voiced on the subject. However, most critics adhere to certain basic approaches which are either thematic or stylistic in character. Burón (1971) conducted a comprehensive survey in an attempt to identify the basic divergences in opinion and he established that renowned critics such as Lewis (1960), Parker (1967), and Miller (1967) were guilty of emphasizing particular aspects of the picaresque at the exclusion of others. He determined three basic trends: either the variety of texts ranged under the picaresque was too wide, leading to a loss of character, or the approach was too analytical and did not take sufficient account of the context; or too much emphasis was placed on the person of the pícaro or on his social conditions. Burón (1971) finally concludes that satire, and by implication irony, constitutes the mainstay of this mode. He is supported by Eustis (1984:164) who reduces the contemporary picaresque to its "traditional satirical function" and to "the existential aspect" which relates to the socially alienated individual or pícaro/pícarara.

What is noteworthy, particularly with reference to this article, is that Burón fails to relate the particular character of the picaresque to the ironic retrospective autobiographical stance of the pícaro and the open ending which, in my opinion, constitute major devices in this mode. The first-person retrospective stance underlines the significance of the episodes recounted and intimates the final ironical stance of 'integration' through ostensible 'subjection' although, by implication, matters are left unresolved. Wicks (1974:242) accurately describes the pícaro as "both victim of the world and its exploiter" and consequently he (Wicks,1974:244) perceives picaresque discourse as a subversive act, claiming that

the act of telling, at any rate, is itself a picaresque gesture of self-assertion by a lowly, insignificant outsider 'confessing' himself to the reader by luring him into his world through ostensibly moral designs.

This makes the pícaro's motivation for his retrospective account questionable. Consequently, the juxtaposition of past and present focuses the reader's attention on the narrative act itself and he/she concludes that lessons so well learnt could not easily be forgotten.<sup>10</sup> Thus the ironic element perceived in the interaction of narratorial stances becomes emblematic of the dialectic between 'reality' and fabrication. Parker (1989:212-13) perceives this function very clearly and he also establishes the relation with autobiographical forms when he says that

the narrator oscillates between acting the role of objective historian (claiming to report only what is known) and hagiographer (justifying the resort to careful interpolation of selected speculation concerning the experiences of the protagonist) in order to account for the outcomes, in such a way that our hold on the distinction between history and fiction is often wholly dissociated – to such an extent that, when confronted with the choice, we prefer the 'fictional' to the 'factual'.

Taking all these factors into account, I would define the contemporary women's picaresque as an exposé of a corrupt and hypocritical male-dominated society through the

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<sup>10</sup> Helen Reed (1984:28) gives a fascinating account of the role of the reader and his implication in the interpretation of the picaresque. She uses an intertextual approach which "attempts to clarify the *relationship* that exists between two works or between the work and system of norms we designate as genre". This takes cognizance of the historical literary interaction of contexts.

autobiographical stance of the pícaro. It traces the influence of such a society on the character and lifestyle of the protagonist-outcast to terminate with an open ending indicative of the narrator's ambivalent attitude towards society. Or, as Brink (1990:261) very succinctly puts it: "... it concerns the autobiography of a traveller in the margin of conventional society, offering an ambiguous view of contemporary values".

#### 4. The pícaro's role assumes new dimensions

When Brink (1990) mentions that the pícaro is not a new invention, he fails to note that she has until recently (Allende and Poniatowska) always been depicted by men, whose protagonist usually adopted the role of prostitute.<sup>11</sup> It is exactly this role which assumes new dimensions in women's literature where it is exploited as a subversive strategy. Marcia Welles's (1986:63) investigation into "narrative strategies; more specifically, into women and endings in the seventeenth-century Spanish picaresque novel" already distinguishes an evolution towards female autonomy in those texts. She suggests that a different reading strategy highlights the inability of a male author to project feminine experience. This resultant male/female dichotomy in narratorial stance is seen as a "corrosion of the picaresque 'voice' into divided and distinct entities" (Welles, 1986:66) which has a subversive implication because the pícaro gains her social freedom "as picaresque figure and as woman. Paradoxically, then, it is her very marginality that grants her the wherewithal to circumvent the established codes of behavior". She (Welles, 1986:67) concludes that a novel such as *La Pícaro Justina* which finally ends in a marriage similar to that in *A Sport of Nature*, acquires a connotation of personal gain or commercialization rather than social integration. The ironic perspective which originates through the disparity between "the traditional code of values and expectations and the new superimposed meanings" (Welles, 1986:68) implies that it is the "combination of beauty and at least a modicum of corruption which ensures these pícaros of their success" and make them "worthy predecessor[s] to Defoe's *Moll Flanders*".

#### 5. Hillela as contemporary pícaro

##### 5.1 Social hypocrisy unveiled

In the first chapter of *A Sport of Nature* Gordimer exposes the blatant inconsistencies prevalent in certain spheres of South African society. Her irony is mainly aimed at white liberalism which Peck (1988:79) aptly defines as "a hypocritical attitudinizing which saves the consciences of its adherents while contributing nothing to needed change in South Africa". The ironic effect is obtained through the retrospective cynical stance of the narrator/focalizer reviewing her life and recalling significant incidents from her childhood which had remained imprinted on her receptive child's consciousness and moulded her personality. At an early age she discovers that adults and truth are not necessarily

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<sup>11</sup> Justina, in *La Pícaro Justina* by Francisco López de Ubeda (1506) is regarded as the first pícaro. Although this text was followed by several others, their character as typical picaresque novels is often questioned because the restrictive social milieu experienced by women prevented them from committing actual deeds of roguery. Consequently, their exploits were mainly restricted to prostitution.

synonymous: "The child had asked questions once or twice, when she was young enough to believe adults gave you answers worth hearing, and had been given an oblique reply" (*Sport*: 4).<sup>12</sup> In this way Gordimer juxtaposes innocence and experience to illustrate a child's confusion when confronted with adult dissimulation and the deceptiveness of social games/rules. Hillela learns that appearances are not to be taken at face value and truth is an evasive quality.

Hillela's personal life is unsettled. She is abandoned by her mother as a small child and has to accompany Len, presumably her father, on his travels as a salesman. Consequently, Hillela becomes part of the 'baggage' of Len's profession:

There had been a time, she must have been very small, when she had played and slept and eaten beside him in his big car with all the boxes of samples, catalogues and order-books piled up in the back. He had made her a nest in there, on rugs stained with cold drinks and icecream she spilt (*Sport*: 5).

The fact that Hillela's Jewish name makes her more of an outsider in her school than her parents' divorce is a good indication of twisted social values: "She was not the only child whose parents were divorced or parted or whatever it was they were. But she was the only Hillela among Susans and Clares and Fionas" (*Sport*: 3). Her efforts to conform are already present in her change of name to suit the particular environment: "she threw Kim up to the rack with her school panama and took on Hillela" (*Sport*: 3). Already at an early age she learns to distinguish the different worlds and act accordingly, to wear the correct social mask or assume the 'protean' character so typical of the picaresque.

During the school holidays she is passed on from aunt to aunt like surplus baggage but no one accepts full responsibility for her well-being – a symptom of modern society. She does not lack material comforts but emotional commitment, security and guidance are absent. The reader is informed that newspapers are present in abundance in Pauline's house to give "information but no guidance" (*Sport*: 59). She is allowed no privacy and never experiences a sense of belonging because she has the doubtful advantage of being the eternal guest (*Sport*: 25). Her room at Olga's illustrates this point quite clearly:

There were some things that were hers: holiday clothes left behind each time when she went back to school, books, trinkets fallen out of favour. Her absence was more permanent than her presence. There was always the sign of some other occupancy of the room (*Sport*: 3-4).

Her only reference to her origin and personal identity is a photograph of her mother which "ended at the shoulders" (*Sport*: 4). Her mother's face is an emotionless mask: "the eyes the only feature that matched any recognizable living reality; they were the eyes of a woman seeing herself in a mirror" (*Sport*: 4).

Her two aunts represent two different poles in the South African society. Olga is materialistic and a snob. She accepts Hillela as long as she fits in with her ordered life and makes no ripples. She regards her as an addition to her collection of possessions and her measure of emotional commitment is restricted to public displays of affection, taking "care not to neglect her young niece in the presence of distinguished company" (*Sport*: 64). She

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<sup>12</sup> *Sport* refers to: Gordimer, Nadine. 1987. *A Sport of Nature*. Cape Town: David Philip.

calls her "the little daughter I didn't have" (*Sport*: 3). For Olga, truth is a means to an end and that is why she advises Hillela callously to lie to Jethro about a visit to Bulawayo: "Why don't you pretend you've been to Bulawayo darling, for heaven's sake. It means so much to him" (*Sport*: 6).

In contrast to Olga, Pauline professes to be the generous white liberal working for 'the Cause'. However, her lifestyle only exhibits a different kind of sterility and selfishness. Her interests also remain restricted to superficial, fashionable causes, which make her an inverted snob. Ironically, she condemns herself when she declares: "I don't have any time for rebels without a cause" (*Sport*: 22) and still later, when she professes to loathe "sanctimonious self-justification" (*Sport*: 97). In retrospect she attempts to justify her actions on behalf of Hillela but she only reveals her self-righteousness, especially with the last phrase: "What harm had been done Hillela? In that house, Pauline and Joe's, she had been treated like one of their own, as long as this was possible" (*Sport*: 97).

## 5.2 Woman and society

Olga introduces Hillela to a microcosm of the "world of women" when she accompanies her to the hairdressing salon. The female condition seems analogous to a cocoon or womb which implies safety but at the same time restriction:

... its chemical garden-sweetness and buzz of warm air from the dryers, fuzz of sheddings on the floor, made the child drowse off as a little animal curls up, recognizing a kind of safety. All was comfortably ritualistic, pampered, sheltered in the ideal of femininity constructed by the women entrapped there. Olga gave her money to go out and buy sweets; she tripped back quickly happy in anticipation of the soothing, sucking comfort to come as she lolled, humming or whispering to herself in the company of ladies deaf within their second steel crania (*Sport*: 6).

It is implied that women are responsible for their own hopeless condition of conformity and submission by attempting to live up to an ideal. In such a world independence is frowned upon and like her mother, Hillela questions such an attitude. She realizes that the mirror image of herself, just like the photograph of her mother, is not her true identity: "In the trance of women gazing at themselves in the mirrors they face, she is seeing herself. The mirror ends her there" (*Sport*: 7). Hillela is an individual – a 'freak'- in traditional female society.

Gordimer's representation of the world of women is part of the depravity exemplified in the rest of society. Hypocrisy is implied through images of decay and corrupt values. In reality, Mandy Herz is going to be educated on how to sell her assets with her parents' approval, a respectable form of prostitution:

Hillela's friend left school and took courses in beauty culture and modelling; she was a very pretty girl, her parents approved of her planning a future through the marketable assets of her face and body, so long as this was done in good taste (*Sport*: 53).

The incisive knife of criticism also pierces the carefully-constructed propriety of girls' schools where subterfuge is regarded as 'harmless' adolescent rebellion. Boy-meet-girl situations are ostensibly forbidden but opportunities exist nevertheless. The headmistress at Hillela's school is suitably offended by her harmless friendship with a coloured boy, Don:

"It was not something that happened within the scope of peccadilloes recognized at a broadminded school for girls of a high moral standard" (*Sport*:13). The image of the teacher who accompanies the girls on their outings to the park alludes to conventional Victorian sexual hypocrisy:

The teacher who accompanied the songololo sat on a bench and read, looking up now and then to enjoy the luxury of huge shade under a mmondo tree that came down over her like a Victorian glass bell (*Sport*: 8).

It is implied that certain misdemeanours are accepted but that there is an unwritten – and racist – code of 'taste' which should not be transgressed. The pervasive hypocrisy of South African society is mercilessly exposed through the school system:

They were educating themselves for their world in Southern Africa in the way the school helplessly abetted, teaching them at morning prayers to love thy neighbour as thyself before they sat down for the day in classrooms where only the white children were admitted.

Surprisingly, society's innate hypocrisy does not rub off on Hillela. She remains a 'natural', as the title of the novel implies. The term "freak" which Brink (1990) uses in his explication of the title should be interpreted as an affirmation of her individuality. She has her own set of codes which is recognized by her friends and enemies alike and one of her greatest attributes – and perhaps defence mechanism – is her total lack of vanity. The psychiatrist, Ben, recognizes it very early on (*Sport*: 105):

In his professional experience of human vanity, her lack of it was amazing. He learnt something he didn't know; it is difficult to make oneself necessary to one who is free of vanity.

### 5.3 Hillela: arch-opportunist and manipulator

Due to her vagrant lifestyle and shallow emotional ties, Hillela's journey through life is strewn with transitory relationships. She regards physical love as the only means of communication – ironically emulating the picaresque's treatment of women as sexual objects. This unique feature of Hillela's character makes her 'invincible' – men recognize in her a dependable person and a companion not prone to the usual hysterics or female vanity. Although she is an opportunist, she chooses her companions with circumspection – they are people like herself who regard sex as a necessary therapy but have more important ideals to fulfil – for example the French ambassador who meets her on equal ground. Men with power attract her, because she recognizes a driving force behind their actions which corresponds with her own. She is quick to recognize worthwhile partners in both Whaila and Reuel. Their unswerving devotion to the cause of liberation and lack of hypocrisy seem to spark off her admiration for them and they present an additional challenge because they are apparently unattainable as married, black, male revolutionaries. Consequently, people like Sasha, Ben, Udi and Bradley are not compatible with her idea of freedom, of "moving on" (*Sport*: 118). They would expect conventional loyalty from her as their woman and be inclined to tie her down. This attitude is reminiscent of James's Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* but in contrast to Isabel, Hillela proves to be a shrewd judge of character – an aptitude she acquired through past experience – and she is no lady in James's sense either.

As she has a sharp intellect, Hillela is a fast learner and she is able to adapt to any situation and turn it to her advantage. The journalist catches her unawares with his defection but

she never allows a similar incident to derail her again. Whether she acts as nursemaid, agent, lecturer, mother or wife she always manages to manipulate the situation in her favour. In her stint as nursemaid in the French ambassador's service she gains valuable knowledge on etiquette and meets important people – which she uses to her advantage in later life – as mother she leaves her child in the care of others and lives on the kindness of friends in London, turning a blind eye to their obvious discomfort. In America she relegates her maternal duties to Bradley and his family: moving in with him proves convenient on more counts than one.

Hillela has attained an equal footing with men, and her sexual attractiveness is an additional advantage. She is appreciated for herself, her intelligence and inordinate capacity to adapt, an almost chameleon-like aptitude. This characteristic is especially evident in her contact with black revolutionaries whose confidence and acceptance she manages to win quite easily. She also seems to undermine women's instinctive fears of rivals and sexual threats so that Ben's wife, Christa and even the worldly Marie-Claude succumb to her apparent lack of guile. The latter even entrusts her with her children and husband.

Hillela's rebellion against hypocritical practices in society has also induced an awareness of politics in her. To her the attainment of an individual, recognized female identity becomes concomitant with political power. This seems to correlate with Lazar's (1990:109) observations on sexual oppression in some of Gordimer's short stories when she claims that "often in these stories there also seems to be a tone of oblique sanction of what Gordimer perceives as female strength and resourcefulness".

#### 5.4 The cynical retrospective stance

Hillela's variety of names, denoting different identities, her detached emotional attitude, vagrant lifestyle and opportunist streak all identify her as a modern pícara. Her cynical retrospective stance underlines this impression. She has been both an exploited victim and an exploiter of society. The personally-biased fictional reconstruction of events is emphasized by a revealing statement indicating a deliberate obliteration of information concerning Hillela's activities during her stay in Johannesburg. It serves as an ironic reminder that the narrator can and will manipulate information to suit her own purposes, as Allende's Eva Luna tells stories. The narrator is reconstructing events and her life at seventeen does not contribute to the line of argument:

This is not a period well-documented in anyone's memory, even, it seems, Hillela's own. For others, one passes into a half-presence (alive somewhere in the city or the world) because of lack of objective evidence and information; for oneself, the lack of documentation is deliberate. And if, later, no-one is sure you really are the same person, what – that is certain to be relevant- is there to document? Everyone is familiar with memories others claim to have about oneself that have nothing to do with oneself (*Sport*: 100).

Personal memories differ and therefore accuracy becomes irrelevant. This brings the relationship between memory and photographs into focus: photographs are static while memories are alive and mutable, analogous to the conventional perceptions of history and

fiction. They embody the retrospective stance assumed by the narrator – telling as much as necessary but perhaps thereby revealing more than expected.

Hillela's final position as wife of the president of the OAU reflects the inherent irony in the position of the pícara in society and the effective critique by means of the open ending of the picaresque mode. Her position is unassailable: she keeps herself indispensable to the president by turning a blind eye to his marital infidelity among their set as well as the growing number of children of the second wife – a position reminiscent of Lazarillo's. The president relies on her for advice and support so that she becomes a true partner, despite her sex. However, as Lazarillo has to live with the idea that he is the husband of a 'kept' woman, she has to live with the fact that she will always be a 'kept' wife in the eyes of the Western world, where bigamy is not recognized. This is the predicament but also the conscious choice of the pícara. She has reconstructed her life story to justify and perhaps advocate this choice. Parker (1989:219) criticizes the fact that Hillela acquires identity via her sexuality but it must rather be seen as supremely ironic, because it serves as an indictment of male double standards.

## 6. Conclusion

Three basic issues have been addressed in this article: the significance of modal and contextual interaction; its relevance to Gordimer's work and her stance on feminism and, finally, the effect of these issues on the interpretation of *A Sport of Nature*.

The first two issues relate to Gordimer's acute awareness of historical context and to her responsibility as a writer. In contrast with Lazar's (1988:209) contention that "Gordimer's politicisation around gender issues is not in synchrony with her politicisation around racial and economic oppression" I believe that the gradual evolution in her political stance has also included an expansion of social concerns and feminist issues. In consequence, the scope of her theme would dictate the appropriation of a suitable vehicle of expression such as the picaresque, which depicts personal/social interaction by positing the individual or pícara against a hostile society. Wicks (1974:244) accurately perceives the function of the picaresque in contemporary literature when he relates it to the "the narrative function of autobiographical and confessional forms". His reference to the autobiographical form raises an important element of the picaresque as it has been defined in this article, namely its characteristic as a sophisticated version of the autobiography. In my opinion, it represents a culmination of the autobiography, the hagiography and the testimonial. As a strategy it represents an effective move from the personal to the universal and with more success than any other mode.

In her combination of feminism with the picaresque, Gordimer has been able to illustrate the problem of marginality with startling clarity and profound implications. She has achieved a fusion of theme and context through the implementation of the satirical stance and open ending. The personal has become political. We are presented with a damning picture of individual and social interaction as observed through the medium of contemporary South African society, and left with an unflattering view of universal human nature at the same time. Gordimer seems to intimate that the present inequality in gender and culture in South Africa as depicted in *A Sport of Nature*, presents an impasse which can

only be resolved by subversive means and power politics which she does not necessarily endorse. In this respect, we detect an aching familiarity between Hillela's final stance and Eustis's (1984:166) description of Pío Baroja's protagonist in *Aurora roja* (1923) who demonstrates:

... the futility of all attempts to achieve economic stability and a minimum of dignity except through aggressive personal initiative and, in the final analysis, the abandonment of idealism and hope for social justice. In the final situation the law of survival is strongest and politics, of whatever stripe, offers no hope for social amelioration.

De Kock's (1988:46) suggestion that Gordimer's political stance is moving away from the "humanist model of a small universe of interpersonal relationships seen from within, towards a more materialist view of life and history" is acceptable but it does not fully recognize the complexity of Gordimer's view on life. In my opinion, Peck (1988) seems to come closest to a divination of Gordimer's intent when he claims:

If Gordimer intends *A Sport of Nature* to be 'inspirational' clearly her message is more about strategy than about tactical details. The point is that love and compassion and the utopian vision they create are necessary but not sufficient in the South African setting, that committed whites must find leverage in the power equation. Such tactical details as are generalizable suggest that the search for levers of power requires a certain rootlessness and ruthlessness, adaptability and survival skill, coupled with a willingness to take advantage of whatever sources of power one may have. Gordimer strongly emphasizes these characteristics in Hillela, although it is less clear that she endorses them.

In conclusion, I would venture to suggest that Gordimer exhibits a profound awareness of human nature and the eventual corruption of power. Through Hillela she projects the only possible solution in the form of adaptation to Africa, but it is marred by the fact that it can only be asserted through selfish and subversive means: an intimation that the solution is still out of reach.

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