

Visible/Invisible Plot Structures: A Deconstructionist Study of Nadine Gordimer's

Jump and Other Stories

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Abstract



*This research presents a deconstructionist reading of selected short stories from Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories* (1991). In so doing, a three-step model of narrative construing is proposed. This three-step model, firstly, locates invisible structures in the plot building of the selected short stories that appear alogical. Secondly, it is argued that at closer scrutiny these invisible constructions appear logical, thus a paradoxical pair of invisible and visible structures is established. Finally, this research postulates that the time-and-again shifting weight of the paradoxical pair eventually reveals the presence of invisible constructions. With this revelation, the plot collapses—which is evident in the short stories' startling, rather jumpy, endings.*

Keywords: Deconstructionist, Invisible Structures, Visible Structures, Paradoxical Parity

Introduction

Nadine Gordimer (born in 1923 in South Asia), the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991, is well known for the political struggle that her novels undertake for South Africa, and predominantly this is the reason that her novels are often been more accredited than her short fiction. Similarly, Karen Lazar cogently argues that “there is something of a critical lacuna in relation to Nadine Gordimer's short fiction when compared with the extensive scholarly criticism available on her novels” (1992, p. 783). Therefore, patently, most of the available critical discourse on Gordimer's short fiction attempts to undo the established critical superiority of her long fiction by weighing it against the thematic diversity of her short fiction.

Examined in connection to the critical superiority of her long fiction, Gordimer's short fiction has been celebrated as a reservoir of either universal themes or political metaphors. It is for the same reason that much of the critical discourse that establishes universal concerns in Gordimer's short stories refers to Gordimer's words, from the introduction to her *Selected Stories* (1975) to base their argument, which are as follows:

I was obliged to read through my five existing collections of stories and saw how there are some stories I have gone on writing, again and again, all my life, not so much because the themes are obsessional but because I found other ways to take hold of them.” (as cited in Smith, 1984, p. 93)

However, like Gordimer's novels which are popular for “articulating the consciousness of contemporary South Africa”, “what is not often realized, or not realized often enough, is that her short stories also contribute to this articulation, and that the short story is just as well-equipped as the novel to attempt it (Huggan, 1994, p. 61). Thus, with their apparent simplicity of theme and narration, the seemingly innocuous short story may well cut deeper than the ostensibly political novel into the fabric of the society. (Huggan, 1994, p. 71).

Likewise, Gordimer's short fiction may prove to be an effective tool to unveil “white ... complicity and/or ineffectuality in facing South African racial realities” (West, 2010, p. 79). Mary West (2010) in “Portraits in Miniature: White English-Speaking South African Women in Selected Short Stories by Nadine Gordimer” gives a deep peep into white women's portraits in Gordimer's short stories. She states that “much of Gordimer's fiction has offered a severely critical reading of

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white women's complicity and/or ineffectuality in facing South African racial realities" (West, p. 79). In this way, West celebrates Gordimer's lurid disapproval of the "profound sense of entitlement" of these white women (West, 2010, p. 79).

Most importantly, it is in the context of exhaustive attempts at establishing the artistic and ideological significance of Gordimer's short fiction by critics that Graham Huggan pinpoints that "the lack of theoretical groundwork does not help; for while theories of the novel abound" (1994, p. 61).

Statement of the Problem

Therefore, the dearth of critical focus on short fiction in general, and Gordimer's short fiction in specific, is due to a serious lack of theoretical groundwork for the analysis of short fiction. The present research therefore addresses this urgent need by proposing a three-step model of textual construing and demonstrates it as a working theoretical method to study selected short stories from Gordimer's short story collection *Jump and Other Stories*.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research therefore are:

1. To propose a three-step model of deconstructionist reading and demonstrate it as a working theoretical model to dissect selected short stories.
2. To establish the critical superiority of Gordimer's short fiction by highlighting its capacity to present intricate narratives and complex plot structures.

Research Questions

Therefore, this research attempts to explore the following questions:

1. How can the proposed three-step model of deconstructionist reading be effectively applied to analyze selected short stories?
2. For what reasons does Gordimer's short fiction make a case for its critical superiority over her long fiction?

Literature Review

Since its publication in 1991, Gordimer's short story collection *Jump and Other Stories* has intrigued readers and researchers for its thematic innuendos. Moreover, predictable attempts at reading the gender politics and the political scene of South Africa have also been inexhaustibly made.

Karen Lazar in "*Jump and Other Stories: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990s: Gender and Politics in her Latest Short Fiction*", for example, argues that Gordimer's "complex, puzzling and sometimes retrograde representations of women and her attitudes to Feminism" are "out of synchrony with her radical political attitudes" (1992, p. 783). Therefore, for Lazar, this contrast between Gordimer's "static and truncated representations" of women and the promulgation of radical political ideals is a matter of grave concern to feminist critics (1992, p. 802).

Nicolas Pierre Boileau in "The Politics of the Couple in Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*: "More important than anything we could ever have to say to each other when we're alone"" offers a unique reading into the presentation of gender politics in Gordimer's short stories (2018). Boileau examines the relationship of various couples in *Jump and Other Stories* to argue that:

The number of dysfunctional couples that can be found in *Jump*, and which prolong the situation found in some of her previous novels, invite us to think about the possibility of a relation, which can then interrogate our ready-made notions about gender politics. (2018, p. 67)

Moreover, in "Liminality, Transience, and the Destabilisation of 'Home' in Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*", Fiona McCann explores the liminal spaces that *Jump and Other Stories* depicts (2018b). McCann postulates:

Most of the stories in Gordimer's 1991 collection feature these moments or states of transformation where the "old and new states are experienced simultaneously" and in many cases, there is an attempt to weave together spatial, temporal, and narratological forms of liminality. Several stories revolve around a moment of transit or transition: 'Jump', the title story, for instance, is set in the liminal space of an empty shell of a hotel. (2018b, p. 38)

Therefore, for McCann, these stories offer an imperative to embrace this liminality or in-betweenness "not as a moment of stasis, but as a time of change and transformation" (2018b, p. 52).

Another research article by Fiona McCann, titled, "Borders, Barriers and Kinopolitics in Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*" undertakes the question of walls, fences, and borders in Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories* (2018a). It is pertinent to observe that McCann juxtaposes

Gordimer's "politics of borders and barriers" with "the fluid form and narrative style of the stories", thereby offering intriguing insights into Gordimer's choice of intricate and complex narrative structures (2018a, p. 292).

Moreover, Ileana Dimitriu's (2009) exploration of "deep structures of theme and mood" in Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories* is an attempt to encounter the dominant critical claim about Gordimer's short story writing as ideologically less significant and/or artistically less accomplished than her novels (p. 95).

Therefore, a review of the previously published research on Gordimer's short story collection *Jump and Other Stories* shows that the previous researches focus more on exploring the thematic terrain, in particular gender politics and South Africa's radical politics, of the selected short story collection. Whereas, very little attention is given to evaluating the narrative structure and form of the selected short stories. The present research therefore proposes an exclusive three-step model of deconstructionist analysis to study the intricate plot structures in the selected short stories.

Research Methodology

In doing so, this research takes inspiration from American deconstruction theorist J. Hillis Miller's writings to corroborate that the relationship between the paradoxical pair of invisible and visible plot structures is paradoxical. Miller (2005) argues that:

The word "deconstruction" ... describes a paradoxical action [the para-doxical is both outside and alongside of the doxic, the officially true] which is negative and positive at once ... It is a paralysis of thought in the face of what cannot be thought rationally: analysis, paralysis; solution, dissolution; composition, decomposition; mantling, dismantling; canny, uncanny ... Deconstructive criticism moves back and forth between the poles of these pairs, proving in its own activity, for example, that there is no deconstruction which is not at the same time constructive, affirmative. (p. 36)

Deconstructive criticism therefore is interested in the terms that constitute these pairs and "binaries" so that an activity of their dismantling can be performed (McQuillan, 2001, p. 23). It is pertinent to mention here that the activity of dismantling or dissolving these pairs and binaries in deconstructive criticism is "unique in each case" (McQuillan, 2001, p. 5). Thus, the strategy of deconstructing a text is not fixed in definition rather keeps on changing and continuing the cycle of construction and deconstruction to resist any fixed meanings, which is the essence of deconstruction.

Our reading of Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories* (1991) reveals that most of the short stories in the collection end on a surprising note and move far from the resolution of the prevailing conflict leading to a new conflict. To dig deep into the cause of these jumpy endings, this paper presents a deconstructionist analysis of selected short stories in three steps. First, it locates invisible structures in the plot building of the short stories that appear alogical. 'Invisible structures' are hidden structures or sub-plots of the main plot, which support the basic plot and stitch it together. Whereas, 'visible structures' are apparent structures on which a plot is constructed, thus a plot has two types of structures "visible" and "invisible" and both these structures are crucial to the plot. Second, it proves that at a closer scrutiny, these invisible constructions are not alogical but rather stitch the plot, thus a paradoxical pair of invisible and visible structures constitutes and the weight of the plot is being lifted by both of these structures. Third, it is argued that the invisible structures invisibly shoulder the plot and their invisible presence is the assurance of their role of stitches to the plot building. Therefore, the moment their invisible existence turns visible, the plot collapses. The transferal of invisible structures into visible ones occurs because of the shifting tilt of the paradoxical pair of invisible and visible structures. Thus, the time and again shifting weight of the paradoxical pair finally reveals the presence of invisible structures and with this revelation, no more (invisible) stitches remain on the scene and the building of the plot collapses—which is evident in the startling endings of the short stories.

Analysis & Discussion

The titular story of *Jump and Other Stories*, "Jump", is a tale of a man who jumps from an anti-revolutionary group into a revolutionary group. The entire plot of the story is dedicated to itemizing the reasons for his shift from an anti-revolutionary group to a revolutionary group. In a press conference, the unnamed protagonist declares that he decided to leave the anti-revolutionary group because he could not bear the sights of "burned down hospitals, cut off ears of villagers, blown up trains full of innocent workers going home to their huts, raped children and women being forced at gunpoint to kill their husbands and eat their flesh" anymore (Gordimer, 1991, p. 13). Therefore, the

plot of the short story "Jump" reveals that the unnamed protagonist's realization of the horrors steered by the anti-revolutionary group made him leave the anti-revolutionary and subsequently join the revolutionary group.

However, as it is maintained that the invisible structures in the plot manifest their presence in the jumpy endings of the stories, an attempt at deconstructing the last few words uttered by the protagonist of "Jump" reveals his clandestine motives behind joining the revolutionary group. Toward the end of the story, the sights that the protagonist sees through the window are similar to the ones he used to witness as a member of the anti-revolutionary group. He narrates: "the bright stare of the beggared city, city turned inside out, no shelter there for life, the old men propped against empty façades to die, the orphaned children running in packs round the rubbish dumps, the men without ears and women with a stump where there was an arm" (Gordimer, 1991, p. 20). Upon witnessing these scenes of horrors instigated by the revolutionary group that he is a part of now, he contemplates a suicide attempt by jumping from the window. However, he does not jump and says "Not now; not yet". The protagonist's words "Not now; not yet" surprise the reader about the protagonist's loyalty towards his people and hint that there are some invisible structures in the plot building that are hidden (Gordimer, 1991, p. 20).

The protagonist's undercover references to his deal of "A house and a car" with the revolutionary group are the invisible structures in the plot, which appear allogical because of their irrelevance with the horrors of the anti-revolutionary group. The deal of "a house and a car" is an invisible structure in the plot which is not allogical rather is as logical as other the visible structures because these invisible structures bespeak the real motives of the protagonist that he switched from the anti-revolutionary group to the revolutionary group out of his temptation for the deal of "a house and a car" (Gordimer, 1991, p. 5). Therefore, in the short story "Jump", the visible structures in the plot are made of the protagonist's patriotism as the reason for his jump from the anti-revolutionary group to the revolutionary group as the protagonist postulates that he left the anti-revolutionary group because he was sick of the sights of horrors caused to South Afrikaners by the anti-revolutionary group. However, the protagonist's veiled deal of "a house and a car" serves as the invisible structures in the plot building of the short story. Consequently, the plot of the short story "Jump" demonstrates a paradoxical friction between the visible and the invisible structures.

It is pertinent to mention here that since the revolutionary group has not provided the protagonist the promised "house and a car", therefore he decides to wait and not jump from the window and utters "not now; not yet" at the end (Gordimer, 1991, p. 20). Moreover, the protagonist compares his shift from the anti-revolutionary group to the revolutionary group with that of jumping from a parachute. As in parachute jumping the pleasure achieved is entirely personal, same is the case with the protagonist's jump from the anti-revolutionary group to the revolutionary group because his deal of "A house and a car" is entirely for his personal gain.

In the story "Jump", from the very beginning the tilt of the plot is towards the invisible pole of paradox (the protagonist's deal of "a house and a car"), but this tilt is hidden. The story starts with the lavish description of the hotel room in which the unnamed narrator has stayed, then shifts to the reasons that triggered him to join the anti-revolutionary force (the reasons were economical) against his people (South Afrikaners). This initial tilt of the plot towards the invisible pole of the paradox causes friction in the plot. As the relationship between the pair of the visible and the invisible pole is paradoxical, the tilt towards the visible pole deconstructs the invisible pole but the invisible pole does not get dissolved fully and again hints at its presence. Therefore, toward the end of the story, the protagonist does not commit suicide on seeing the horrors unleashed upon his people and rather decides not to jump from the window, the tilt of the plot re-shifts towards the invisible pole (a house and a car) of the paradox (Gordimer, 1991, p. 20). This eventual shift of tilt towards the invisible pole reveals the presence of the invisible structures and makes the invisible structures visible and the visible invisible resulting in the collapse of the running plot (the protagonist's patriotic tales). So, the transferal of the visible structures into invisible and the invisible structures into visible breaks the binary between them and leaves them in a paradoxical flux.

Another short story "Once Upon a Time" ends on a very shocking note, when the only son of a happily living white family is slashed, chopped, and cut through the automatic razor security system. The story revolves around a happily living family, the husband, the wife and their little boy who live in a suburb cut apart from the black community. The family has taken the maximum

measures to save themselves from riots, burglars, and intrusions from outside the suburb. The family has installed a range of security gadgets, ranging from security gates, implantation of broken glasses into walls, wire covering, and finally automatic razors security system. A cursory reading of the short story reveals that the instruments to cope with fear of riots, buglers and intrusions are the visible structures of the plot. However, the shockingly unexcepted ending of the short story hints at the presence of some invisible structures in the plot.

A closer scrutiny of the very structure of the plot reveals that along with the instruments to cope with fearfulness, the family also brought some gadgets of fearlessness for their little boy in the form of “a Space Man outfit and a book of fairy tales” (Gordimer, 1991, p. 28). Ultimately, the apparently unimportant narrative of these gadgets of fearlessness becomes the invisible structures of the plot of “Once Upon a Time”. Their invisible structures uncover the real blunder made by the family as at the end the little boy “pretended to be the prince who braves the terrible thicket of thorns to enter the palace and kiss the sleeping beauty back to life” and puts a ladder to the wall and gets slashed through the razors (Gordimer, 1991, p. 28). Thus, it can be underscored that the plot building of the story “Once Upon a Time” is constructed on both visible and invisible structures. The instruments to cope with fearfulness are the visible structures and the gadgets to trigger fearlessness are the invisible structures of the plot, both these structures (visible “fearfulness” and invisible “fearlessness”) seem in opposition to each other. However, these opposing structures of the plot are not in opposition to each other, rather move step by step as it is evident in the text of the story that when “the wise old witch, the husband’s mother, paid for the extra bricks as her Christmas present to her son and his wife—the little boy got a Space Man outfit and a book of fairy tales” (Gordimer, 1991, p. 28).

The relationship between the visible and the invisible structures therefore is paradoxical. In “Once Upon a Time”, the plot starts with its tilt towards the invisible pole of the paradox, the narrator names the story “a bedtime story” which projects fearlessness promulgated in bedtime stories. However, after a few pages, the plot of “Once Upon a Time” tilts its weight towards the visible pole, and the story in the progression is no more a story of “fearlessness” but “fearfulness” caused by the risk of riots, buglers and intrusion. Thus, the plot is built on the paradoxical pair of invisible (fearlessness) and visible (fearfulness) structures, and their inner tussle provides “the hidden energy” of a text (qtd. in Cain, 1979, p. 372). Likewise, Miller (2002) corroborates that the inner tussle in a text reinforces the need for attention towards the hidden phenomenon in texts, therefore “rather than surveying the text with sovereign command from outside, it remains caught within the activity in the text it retraces” (p. 37). Thus, the interaction between the visible and the invisible structures causes tension in the plot. When the family chooses to install the latest instrument to cope with fearfulness by fitting an automatic razor security system in their house, the tilt of the plot shifts towards the visible pole of the paradox and it seems that the running conflict of the plot is resolved. However, the surprise ending of the story when the family suffers the tragedy of their little boy’s death despite having such expensive security systems reveals that no resolution of the conflict is achieved. This shock and jump that readers experience is caused because of the re-shift of the tilt towards the invisible pole of the paradox, and this re-shift of the tilt not only deconstructs the running plot of the short story but also turns the invisible structures visible and the visible invisible.

Similarly, on the surface level, in the short story “The Ultimate Safari”, the journey of the little girl, her first-born brother, her little brother, her grandmother, and her grandfather through Kruger Park is a struggle for survival. This quest for survival is a footstep towards the process of progression and their aim is to find a better, free of bandits and secure space for them. Paradoxically, the immigrant family’s journey for survival is embedded with a chain of images that reflect the state of regression. During their journey through the Kruger Park the little girl’s “first-born brother and the other boys brought (a tortoise) to the man so it could be killed and we could cook and eat it” but they do not make the fire because of their fear of being caught by the “police” or “wardens” (Gordimer, 1991, p. 37). This image of making fire paradoxically reflects both progression and regression at once. The image of making fire on the one hand shows the pursuit of progression. The act of igniting a fire and cocking a tortoise on it to quench hunger is a footstep towards survival hence progression, however, the element of fear associated to make fire recalls the primitive fear of human beings at making fire. Therefore, it seems that the effort of making fire is more a step towards regression than progression. This deconstruction analysis of the short story reveals that the visible structure in the plot

of “The Ultimate Safari” is the immigrant family’s struggle for progression. Moreover, the invisible structures in the plot are made of the process of regression which is also hinted at through the surprise ending of the story, when the little girl shows her resolution for regression from the progressed and secured state to a dangerous state, she says “I’ll go back. I’ll go back through that Kruger Park. After the war, if there are no bandits any more, our mother may be waiting for us” (Gordimer, 1991, p. 30). Thus, the invisible structures in the plot are not alogical rather the weight of the plot is being lifted by both invisible and visible structures.

It is pertinent to note that in “The Ultimate Safari” the immigrant family of Mozambique endures a journey of hardships through the Kruger Park, their immigration reflects their quest for progression but their entire safari through the Kruger Park is embedded with the images of regression. The boy’s fear of making fire, the family’s chase of animals as a guide to water and food, and the grandmother’s carrying of the baby boy like money, all these images show the state of regression. Therefore, in the plot of the short story, the parity between “progression” and “regression” is established which is paradoxical. To fall back in a state of regression is apparently a negative movement but it is affirmative too, because without regression the immigrant family can’t achieve the state of progression so regression becomes a tool of progression.

Thus, the paradox pair of regression (invisible pole) and progression (visible pole) in the plot of “The Ultimate Safari” is not destructive but is both destructive and constructive at once. “The Ultimate Safari” begins with the tilt of the plot toward the invisible pole “regression” when the immigrant family imitates animals to access food and water, the narrator says “We must move like animals among the animals” and “We followed the animals to where they drank when they had gone, we went to their water-holes” (Gordimer, 1991, pp. 37-38). This tilt toward the invisible pole is the primary tension of the story and when after reaching a “very big tent” the family starts imitating humans, the weight of the plot tilts towards the visible pole “progression”. The narrator says “our grandmother knows women here who showed her where there is good grass for sleeping mats” (Gordimer, 1991, p. 41). However, at the end of the short story, the little girl’s resolution of regression, “I’ll go back. I’ll go back through that Kruger Park. After the war if there are no bandits anymore, our mother may be waiting for us”, re-shifts the tilt towards invisible pole—regression (Gordimer, 1991, p. 30). This re-shift towards regression (the invisible pole) turns the invisible pole into visible and the visible into invisible and with this transferal the running plot is destroyed leading to another conflict – the little girl’s resolution of regression.

Conclusion

By taking the short stories “Jump” and “The Ultimate Safari” as a case for applying the proposed three-step model of textual construing, this research has therefore attempted to introduce an exclusive method for studying short fiction. Since working theoretical methods for short fiction are scarce, this research intends to fill this lacuna by proposing a new deconstructionist stratagem to study the complex plot structures of short fiction in particular.

Therefore, it is argued that thematic diversity is not the only strength of Gordimer’s short fiction, rather her short stories display complex narratives and intricate plot structures that invite the careful attention of readers and researchers alike. In the end, the application of the proposed three-step model of deconstruction analysis on Gordimer’s selected short accentuates that the plots of Gordimer’s short stories are constructed on the paradoxical parity of visible and invisible structures which do not have a fixed position because in the course of plot development invisible structures turn visible and visible invisible. Therefore, it is indispensable to examine the movement of the tilt of the paradoxical pair to expose its paradoxical relationship of construction and deconstruction to prove that the continuous shift of tilt eschews any fixed position to both the poles of paradox. Furthermore, the sifting of tilt turns the invisible structures into visible and the visible into invisible ones, and in this way, the binary between visible and invisible is dissolved. Resultantly, this paradoxical association of visible and invisible structures manifests itself in surprising, rather jumpy, endings of Gordimer’s short stories, and this “jump” indeed is the ultimate aim of deconstruction criticism.

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