

**Literary convention as a feminist strategy: The nature and function of
the picaresque in selected novels by women authors from Latin
America and South Africa, 1970-1990**

by

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
Philosophiae Doctor in the Faculty of Arts (Department of English
Language and Literature) of the Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir
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Madrid)

Potchefstroom

May 1995

Acknowledgements:

- * Supervisors: Prof. Annette Combrink for her faith and unstinting support and Prof. Cathy Maree for her meticulous care and encouragement.
- * Friends and colleagues : For their forbearance, advice and endless discussions as well as shouldering the workload during my sabbatical.
- * My husband and daughters: For their love and understanding as well as sacrifices.
- * PU for CHE : Staff grant for research in the USA
- * Prof. Lefevere for his invaluable assistance and Prof. Scherzer for her cordial invitation to visit Texas University at Austin as a visiting scholar.
- * The following libraries:
 - The Ferdinand Postma Library at the University of Potchefstroom.
 - The Library of the University of South Africa in Pretoria.
 - The Benson Library at the University of Texas in Austin.
 - The Library of the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of London.
 - The Library of the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin.
 - The Library of the Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.

Financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development is gratefully acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this thesis are those of the writer and should not be imputed to the CSD.

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY

The emergence of the picaresque in some contemporary women's novels from postcolonial countries has focused the attention on the nature and function of the picaresque and the manipulation of modes as a subversive strategy.

As a cultural construct, the novel represents and interacts with the mores and concerns of a society but it is argued that women's issues have been absent from mainstream literature. This occurrence is attributed to the difference between male and female experience which evolved into a personal and domestic sphere for women and a public domain for men. *Difference* was perceived as a binary opposition and reinforced through culture with the result that women became marginalized - similar to the colonization of minorities.

The first chapter attempts to contextualize the situation of women and indicate the problems they have to face. It is argued that a certain common ground exists between women from different cultures and ethnic groups and it is further postulated that by uniting their forces they might effectively oppose a male-dominated society. Furthermore, the postmodernist concept of the dissolution of boundaries is discussed with regard to the close relationship between *fiction* and *history*.

As the aggressive feminist stance in society and literature has mostly been rejected by contemporary feminists and many now support a conciliatory agenda, their strategies in combatting domination and inequality have also changed. They have realized (and begun to exploit) the subversive potential of literature and language. In particular, they have become aware of the effectiveness of structural and formal codes in the reinforcement of meaning. Their writing displays a subjective preoccupation as they evince a predilection for autobiographical writing like the *testimonial* and the *picaresque*. The picaresque has a political connotation because of its inherent social critique but it is also situated within the autobiographical paradigm and is therefore an appropriate mode for feminist subversive strategy. This mode is discussed in the second chapter and its most prominent aspects, which also occur in the selected

texts, are defined: its testimonial character, its element of social critique and the self-conscious or metafictional aspect of the mode are identified.

The four novels which have been selected are *Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende, *A sport of nature* by Nadine Gordimer, *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena* by Elsa Joubert and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* by Elena Poniatowska. It is very fortunate that although the four novels all manifest picaresque traits, each also emphasizes a particular aspect more than the others. This difference also indicates an interesting progression in the evolution of women's novels from the personal testimonial to the picaresque as a moral corrective with political implications, to a metafictional/self-consciousness.

All the novelists manipulate traditional conventions, whether social or literary. In Chapter 3, I discuss mainly Poniatowska with Joubert in counterpoint because *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena* cannot be classified as picaresque according to the criteria used. Poniatowska creates a testimonial of an authentic washerwoman named Jesusa Palancares in the text. She recounts her life to Poniatowska who acts as facilitator and reconstructs the life of a courageous and independent spirit.

The chapter on Gordimer, Chapter 4, features Hillela Capran as a protagonist who seems to epitomize the image of the contemporary *pícaro*. She inverts the role of the *pícaro* and thereby illustrates the double marginalization of women.

The fifth chapter depicts *Eva Luna*, whose independence prompts her not only to reconstruct her past but also to construct her future. She illustrates that history has a double face and women need to assert their right to reinscribe themselves in history. The main theme which emerges from these novels is that of female assertion in various ways and by different means.

What has emerged most persuasively from this study is that women writers have resorted to an effective, quietly devastating subversion of the traditional stereotypical roles ascribed to women by asserting their independence and rewriting literature and, by implication, history - and thus finally and irrevocably (re-)inscribing themselves into history.

OPSOMMING

Die verskyning van die pikareske styl in sommige kontemporêre romans deur vroue van post-koloniale lande het die klem geplaas op die karakter en funksie van die pikareske en die manipulasie van styl as 'n subversiewe strategie.

As 'n kulturele konstruk, verteenwoordig en reageer die roman op die tradisies en belange van 'n gemeenskap maar dit word uitgewys dat vrouebelange nie in die hoofstroomletterkunde verteenwoordig is nie. Hierdie fenomeen word toegeskryf aan die verskil in ervaring tussen mans en vroue wat ontwikkel het in 'n persoonlike en huislike terrein vir vroue en 'n publieke gebied vir mans. Verskil is tevore beskou as 'n binêre teenstelling en was versterk deur die kultuur wat tot die gevolg gehad het dat vroue gemarginaliseer was - in 'n proses wat gelykstaande aan die kolonisasie van minderhede beskou kan word.

Die eerste hoofstuk poog om die situasie van vroue te kontekstualiseer en om hulle probleme aan te dui. Daar word aangevoer dat daar sekere ooreenkomste tussen vroue van verskillende kulture en etniese groepe bestaan en daar word voorgestel dat die vereniging van kragte 'n effektiewe teenvoeter sal wees vir 'n mans-georiënteerde samelewing. Voorts word die postmodernistiese konsep van die verwydering van grense bespreek met betrekking tot die noue band tussen fiksie en geskiedenis.

Aangesien kontemporêre feministe meesal die aggressiewe feministiese houding in die gemeenskap sowel as in die letterkunde verwerp het, toon baie van hulle nou 'n toegeefliker agenda en het hulle strategieë om oorheersing en ongelykheid te bestry ook verander. Hulle het begin om die subversiewe potensiaal van letterkunde en taal te besef (en te verken). Hulle het veral bewus geword van die effektiwiteit van strukturele en formele kodes in die beklemtoning van betekenis. Hulle werk toon 'n subjektiewe instelling wat duidelik na vore kom in hulle voorliefde vir autobiografiese skryfwyses soos die "testimonial" en die pikareske. Die pikareske het 'n oorwegend politieke betekenis as gevolg van sy inherente gemeenskapskritiek maar dit is ook terselfdertyd deel van die outobiografiese paradigma en is dus ook 'n geskikte styl vir subversiewe

strategieë deur vroue. Hierdie modus word in die tweede hoofstuk bespreek en die mees prominente aspekte wat in die gekose romans voorkom word gedefinieer: die "testimonial" karakter, die element van sosiale kritiek en die selfbewuste of metafiktiewe aspek word geïdentifiseer.

Die vier romans wat bespreek word is *Eva Luna* deur Isabel Allende, *A sport of nature* deur Nadine Gordimer, *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena* deur Elsa Joubert and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* deur Elena Poniatowska. Dit is ook voordelig dat alhoewel die vier romans besliste pikareske trekke vertoon, elkeen ook 'n spesifieke aspek van die styl beklemtoon. Hierdie verskille toon ook 'n interessante ontwikkeling in die evolusie van vroueromans aan wat strek van die persoonlike "testimonial", tot die pikareske as morele toonaangewer met politieke implikasies, tot 'n metafiktiewe selfbewustheid.

Al die romans manipuleer tradisionele konvensies, sosiaal en letterkundig. In Hoofstuk 3, bespreek ek hoofsaaklik Poniatowska met Joubert as agtergrond vergelyking want *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena* kan nie volgens die kriteria wat gebruik is as 'n pikareske verhaal kwalifiseer nie. Poniatowska skep 'n "testimonial" van 'n oorspronklike wasvrou genaamd Jesusa Palancares. Laasgenoemde vertel haar lewensgeskiedenis aan Poniatowska wat optree as mediator en die lewe van 'n dapper en onafhanklike gees rekonstrueer.

Die hoofstuk oor Gordimer, Hoofstuk 4, beeld Hillela Capran uit as 'n protagonis wat die kontemporêre *picara* versinnebeeld. Sy keer die rol van die *ptcaro* om en illustreer daardeur die dubbele marginalisasie van vroue.

Die vyfde hoofstuk, verbeeld Eva Luna, wie se onafhanklike gees haar lei om nie net haar verlede te rekonstrueer nie maar ook om haar toekoms te konstrueer. Sy onthoof die dubbele gesig van die geskiedenis en toon aan dat vroue hulle regte moet eis om in die geskiedenis her-ingeskryf te word. Die handhawing van vroueregte vorm die hooftema in hierdie romans en dit word deur middel van verskeie kanale en metodes versinnebeeld.

Wat egter baie duidelik na vore gekom het in hierdie studie is dat vroueskrywers oorgegaan het na 'n effektiewe en vernietigende subversie van die tradisionele stereotiepe rol wat aan die vrou toegeskryf is. Hulle het versoek om hulle onafhanklikheid te bewys deur die her-inskrywing van die vrou in letterkunde, en by implikasie, in die geskiedenis.

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Preamble and contextualization

This contextualization will attempt to define the premises on which my thesis has been based; indicate the exact parameters and scope of my subject matter; identify the pertinent issues and strategies involved and their relevance to the contemporary social and literary scene; and emphasize the significance of a pluralistic approach to literature within the prevalent political and social situation.

Taking as a precept that literature is a cultural construct which exists in dynamic interaction with its particular social context, it is assumed that social and political events find resonance in literary discourse which, in turn, effects vicarious experience (Alter 1984:11), contributes to the expansion of perspective and fulfils a vital function of social critique. It is within this socio-literary paradigm that two seminal issues in the contemporary debate are identified and addressed: the position of women, or the Other, as a marginalized group in society and the significance of comparative literary studies in the expansion of cultural parameters and perspectives.

Despite the active opposition initiated by feminist movements in the 1960s against social discrimination and the physical abuse of women, various forms of discrimination are still prevalent in contemporary society. This is evident in the plethora of feminist publications which attest to and expose social and literary discrimination; it is present as a main theme in women's novels and features as a prominent issue in feminist criticism.¹ Its relevance is also confirmed by the number of women's societies, bookshops and publishing houses - such as Virago in London and Harvester in Brighton - which have been established to meet and promote the interests of women. Furthermore, the fact that the position of women is still being addressed and debated in a number of doctoral theses² also

1 Naomi Lindstrom (1989) provides a comprehensive survey of Latin American feminist literary criticism from the 1970s to the 1990s covering a wide spectrum of themes and interests.

2 Women and their struggle for social identity constitute an ongoing debate in academic circles and doctoral theses on women in literature. To mention but a

serves to underline its relevance to a study of contemporary social and intercultural relations and stresses the fact that it has not yet been satisfactorily addressed and resolved.

Even today, physical abuse and degradation of women occur too frequently and this remains a major source of concern for World Health Organizations and Human Rights Defenders such as Amnesty International. In a recent article on a Convention of World Health Organizations in Cairo, Marguerite Holloway (1994:73) reports that the practise of clitoridectomy is still performed on ten year old girls in Egypt and many parts of Africa - with only rudimentary hygienic precautions. As late as 1991, the founder of Amnesty International, Peter Benenson, expressed his concern about the abuse and torture of women in an interview published in *El País* (1991).

It is therefore my aim to examine several contemporary texts by women from different countries in order to determine the extent to which literary discourse is engaged in and articulates women's struggle for social and political recognition. The focus falls on postcolonial countries, Mexico, Chile³ and South Africa respectively, where the marginalization of women is emphasized through gender, race and class differences. In order to determine the female perspective on experience, I have chosen texts pertaining to autobiographical writing by women with female narrators/focalizers. However, most of these texts also indicate a concomitant growth of political awareness which transcends personal experience to become common experience. Lourdes Torres (1991:275)

few topics of recent PhD dissertations: Ryan, Pamela Dale. 1988. 'What do women want?': a psycho-literary investigation into the quest for fulfillment in recent writing by women (1965-1985); Santucci, Filomena Maria. 1988. Women in Mexico: an analysis of female characterization in the fiction of Elena Poniatowska and Du Plessis, J.W. 1991. Feminisme in die oeuvres van enkele Afrikaanse vroueprosaïste na sestig [Feminism in the oeuvres of some Afrikaans women prose writers after the sixties.]

- 3 It seems significant that the texts from the Latin American countries manifesting female assertion, should emanate from Mexico and Chile because Ann Pescatello (1973:xv) also identifies them as countries with a "longer history of public concern for the female" than other Latin American countries.

explains how writing enables women to come to terms with oppression or at least to recognize it in themselves, when she states that

activist politics develop when one comes to understand the dynamics of how one is oppressed and how one oppresses others in her daily life. It is from this place that connections with other oppressed people are possible; when one comes to understand the basis of one's own pain and how it is connected to the pain of others, the possibility of forming coalitions with others emerges.

As a basis for analysis, I use a semio-structuralist approach which accommodates the socio-historical context of the relevant texts and their authors and provides the framework for a structural exploration of narrative strategies and literary conventions/modes such as the testimonial and the picaresque. Such an inclusive approach acknowledges **differences** among women⁴ but also takes into account the significance of formal and structural devices as strategies of subversion. In fact, this approach illustrates my conviction that experience is multi-dimensional - whether masculine or feminine - and substantiates Rita Felski's (1989:19) suggestion that a theoretical approach "which can address the social meanings and functions of literature in relation to women writers and readers" is necessary to evaluate women's literature as an identifiable construct. The value and significance of such an approach is exemplified in the dual and multiple narration of several women's novels.

4 It must be kept in mind that there are different kinds of feminism such as liberal, radical, socialist and postmodernist which address women's issues from different angles (Du Toit & Krog 1994:23). However, in an attempt to define "feminism", Karen Offen (1988:134) identifies two "distinct modes of historical argumentation or discourse that have been used by women and their male allies on behalf of women's emancipation from male control in Western societies" which she terms "relational" and "individualist". These two kinds of discourse could, in a general sense, be associated with French and Anglo-American feminism respectively (Offen 1988:135). Whereas the former emphasizes "women's rights as *women*", the latter claims "individual human rights and celebrates the quest for personal independence" (Offen 1988:136). This distinction will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

Subversive strategies in women's fiction⁵ have evolved in opposition to the patriarchal-dominated⁶ social system and the constraints imposed by the male literary canon.⁷ Women write in order to assert female experience as distinctive from male experience and thus attempt to reinscribe themselves in history.⁸ Birutė Ciplijauskaitė (1988:205) notes that subversion is the device most often used by women to create a different feminist discourse. She explains (1988:205) that it extends to all levels and aspects of literature such as themes, conventions and stylistic models and that it is most often manifested through inversion or irony.

Apart from the inversion and juxtapositioning of stereotypical roles, women have also realized the subversive potential of modal and structural manipulation which, as Felski (1989:60) observes, illustrates that structure is "not only constraining but *enabling*". In this respect, Latin American women authors such as Poniatowska and Allende have utilized modes such as the testimonial picaresque and magic realism. In South Africa, the debunking of male-dominated conventions has not been quite as overt as in Latin America. Although aspects of fantasy and magic realism have featured in Afrikaans women's fiction,⁹ the English novel by women in South Africa has remained largely unaffected, apart from Gordimer's *A sport of nature*, Sheila Fugard's *The castaways* and the works of Bessie Head. South African feminist strategies can therefore mainly be identified

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- 5 I would endorse Jennifer Breen's (1990:x) definition of subversion as "any writing that shows up the *status quo* instead of supporting it".
 - 6 Jennifer Breen (1990:x) defines patriarchy as "a society in which men are dominant in all the positions of power - police, military, industry, government, banking, civil service, trade unions, higher education and so on".
 - 7 Canon is understood to be, in Lauter's (1985:31) terms, "a means by which culture validates social power".
 - 8 It is interesting to note Barbara Harlow's (1987:78-79) contention that the novel "challenges" history. As far as women's literature is concerned, it would then imply that they reconstruct another version of official history.
 - 9 Recent publications by Afrikaans women authors have shown a surprisingly innovative trend, among others: Wilma Stockenström's *Die kremetartekspedisie*; Fransi Philips's *Die wilde kind*; Marita van der Vyver's *Griet skryf 'n sprokie* and Lettie Viljoen's *Karolina Ferreira*.

in autobiographical and testimonial writing as examples of female assertion and self-affirmation. This is especially relevant to the work of black South African women, for example, Phyllis Ntantala, Ellen Kuzwayo and Miriam Tlali.

My argument addresses four basic questions which roughly determine the chapter divisions of the thesis. These questions all concern women's quest for social equality as it has been expressed in selected women's novels (1970-1990)¹⁰ within the multicultural and postcolonial contexts of Latin America (Mexico and Chile) and South Africa. In these countries, especially Mexico and South Africa due to their mixed cultural heritages, the exigencies of colonialism have left indigenous women doubly marginalized: through political and racial oppression as well as through socio-cultural constraints and repressive literary censorship (Masiello, 1987:12).

The **first question** concerns the basic rights of women and the existing *status quo* pertaining to women in the countries under consideration. Are women justified in their complaints about social discrimination and what are their expectations? In this respect, I discuss women's continued marginalization in society, indicate how it has been exacerbated in postcolonial conditions and how women have addressed these problems. The evolution of feminist movements can be seen as analogous to the stages of the liberation struggle in imperialist territories where the indigenous populations resented and ultimately reacted to the imposition of foreign cultures - in South Africa the Dutch responded to English domination and the indigenous population, in turn, responded to Dutch/Afrikaner rule in a similar way - and resorted to nationalism as a form of solidarity and a definitive norm of identity. However, it must be kept in mind that the quest for individual identity implies association with a certain group within a specific context, whether by gender or race, and that

10 The period specified in this study has mainly been determined by the revival of feminists movements in the 1960s and the conscious articulation of women's grievances in their literature since then. Although the 1960s are generally regarded as the period of feminist activity, positive assertion only came into literary fruition in the 1970s and 1980s (Felski 1989:72)

nationalization or exclusivity, poses an implicit threat as it could incur another form of colonization which Wright (1992:28) explicitly underlines when he says that "the very effort to reverse the polarities of metropolis and colony, centre and margin ends up confirming these categories because it takes them for granted". Consequently, he (Wright 1992:28) advocates an "open" or pluralist approach which acknowledges different cultures without renouncing one for the other or the one neutralizing the other (Yúdice 1992:ix).

This interpretation would also be applicable to feminist politics which have evolved from a covert - in imitation of men's texts - **feminine**¹¹ stance to an aggressively **feminist** one - which had been met with intransigent and aggressive reactions - and has, during the eighties, reverted to a less radical **female**-oriented view which acknowledges the validity of **difference** but claims social equality and the recognition of women's contributions to society as complementary dimensions of experience. This fact is readily acknowledged by Huyssen (1990:250-251) who emphatically stresses that "women's art, literature and criticism are an important part of the postmodern culture of the 1970s and 1980s and indeed a measure of the vitality and energy of that culture". It is then in order to assert their right to social equality that women have taken recourse to subversive strategies which promote the reversal of polarities or, rather, "deconstruct" the concept of hierarchy as it exists in traditional Western thought (Davis 1989:207). In revising and reinscribing themselves into the male literary canon, women perceive **difference** as a revitalizing force which promotes the alternative or multiple perspectives so crucial to an understanding of social relationships and therefore also unofficial or personal versions of history.

Although individual experience cannot be generalized and **difference** must be acknowledged and respected among individuals as well as groups, certain areas of female experience - this would also be applicable to male

11 Elaine Showalter (1979:36) traces the trajectory of the feminist movement in English literature and identifies these three stages which seem to accurately describe its evolution in various other literatures as well.

experience¹² - do overlap/correspond. For this purpose, a comparative approach will be used to illustrate that such a commonality could only serve to enrich and motivate the feminist struggle for self-determination and in no way detract from existing differences between women. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1990:35) emphasize such an approach when they maintain that a postmodern feminist theory's concern should be "a matter of alliances rather than one of unity around a universally shared interest or identity".

The **second and pivotal question** concerns the ways in which women are represented in literature and how, through this medium, they have countered and addressed the social injustices they still experience. What particular literary strategies have women implemented in order to: counter oppressive practices; allow them to assert the validity of their own individual experience as women; reinscribe themselves in history? This question will be addressed by referring to the influence of literature, its subversive potential as a forum of protest for the marginalized (Felski 1989:166) and the value of comparative literature in the creation of new perspectives. As context plays an important role in the interpretation of texts, and as Rita Felski (1989:2) persuasively points out, "the political value of literary texts from the standpoint of feminism can be determined only by an investigation of their social functions and effects in relation to the interests of women in a particular historical context", the socio-historical background of the specific texts will also feature in the discussion.

As such an analysis would elicit a comparative approach, I have chosen four women authors from two different continents who all use a formal strategy or mode - in this case, the picaresque - as an effective technique of subversion: Elsa Joubert (South Africa), Elena Poniatowska (Mexico), Nadine Gordimer (South Africa) and Isabel Allende (Chile). Although I refer specifically to Elsa Joubert in the third chapter and elsewhere, her text, *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*, does not conform to the

12 It must be noted that gender is not the only criterion that has to be considered with regard to **difference** (Butler 1990:3/4).

picaresque in the same measure as Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. However, as the value of Joubert's text lies in its testimonial quality and the use of an intermediary to articulate the testimony, I have used it in counterpoint to *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and also as a balance in the representation of Latin American and South African texts.

Despite clear correlations among these texts from different continents, they also indicate differences in the nature and perception of literature in their respective regions as I have already indicated in their approach to formal strategy above.¹³ For instance, the particular use of magic realism as an enhancement of the dialectic between history and reality in the Latin American texts, as well as the advantages of fantasy - its "cynicism" and "greater detachment" (Wood 1992:36) - will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter.

The first two questions are addressed in Chapter 1, while the nature and function of literary conventions/modes and their role within the postmodernist context will feature prominently in Chapter 2. This chapter will also serve to identify the thematic, social and formal literary conventions which will be analysed according to a semio-structuralist paradigm.

The **third question** concerns the specific mode explored and its implementation by women exponents: what modes are explored and to what purpose? In illustration of subversive techniques I have chosen to explore the nature and function of the **picaresque mode** as it is exemplified in contemporary women's literature. Although the significance of subjectivity and its manifestation in autobiographical writing by women will be discussed in general, the picaresque will feature in particular as one of the most prominent and effective strategies/modes of **subverting** the male canon. Because it already presupposes a political purpose¹⁴ with an

13 Felicity Wood (1992:34) points out that realism is "the dominant mode in English South African writing".

14 The picaresque originated in the sixteenth century in Spain as a critique of the corruption of social norms and the hypocrisy of social institutions. The

implicit social critique, it serves a dual purpose in representing and deconstructing women's marginalization.¹⁵ As a convention, it is in continuous interaction with historical and political contexts and its very adaptability and mutability make it eminently suitable for the purposes of addressing political and social issues of importance. It also pertains to the postmodernist spirit of the dissolution of boundaries and the questioning of the validity of traditional systems and norms.

The picaresque constitutes a confluence of the various trends discernible in contemporary women's writing. However, three main aspects feature recurrently in most accepted versions¹⁶ of the mode and particularly in women's writing: its autobiographical motivation and testimonial¹⁷ character; the strong element of irony and social critique voiced by a marginalized/outcast pícaro and finally, the element of fictionalization evident in the retrospective reconstruction of past events and the open ending which invites the reader's participation in the resolution of the social dilemma. Thus, it effectively incorporates the testimonial quality of writing with its social critique - but distinguishes itself by a strongly flavoured ironical tone - and also subtly anticipates the postmodernist dialectic between fact and fiction.

As this is a socio-literary study, the basic analysis of the texts will focus on two main issues: the assertion of a female identity through the juxtaposition or implied juxtaposition with traditional "stereotypical"¹⁸ images of

anonymous text, *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades* (1554) is usually regarded as the original introduction to this mode.

- 15 The term "deconstruct" is used to indicate the subversion of the male literary canon and highlight women's marginality through the double inversion of the pícaro as woman and outsider.
- 16 Various definitions of the mode exist but as it is difficult to define a mode and to determine constants due its protean character and reliance on context, I shall focus on recurrent formal devices which reinforce the thematic concerns of the mode.
- 17 Beverley (1992:94) notes that testimonial literature or, as he terms it, "a literature of personal witness and involvement", can be related to the liberation struggle throughout the Third World.

women - here the *pícaro* performs a crucial and significant role of double marginalization in class and gender - and secondly, the introduction of irony through a dual/multiple perspective which invalidates a single/official perspective and the open ending as a concomitant feature of this mode. By way of explanation, the ironic vision emanates from the perception of a discrepancy between the personal and official rendition/version of experience which is observed through the detached perspective of a facilitator or a mature protagonist/narrator and the reader. These "onlookers" or spectators are presented with both versions of experience simultaneously which elicits their participation in the game of reconstruction. Thus, in the testimonial, the ironic aspect is not derived from the testimony itself but it is evoked through the reflexive perspective of the facilitator. These issues are addressed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively, where different aspects of the picaresque are emphasized.

It is interesting to note that, although all the texts under intensive scrutiny, *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena* by Elsa Joubert, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* by Elena Poniatowska, *A sport of nature* by Nadine Gordimer and *Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende, conform in some measure to the picaresque mode defined in this thesis, their emphases seem to differ in accordance with the autobiographical, ironical and fictional aspects mentioned above. This has then been a major consideration in the analysis of the selected texts and the subsequent division of chapters. The spontaneous division is, however, also indicative of a natural progression evinced in women's literature: the personal evolves into the political which finally finds an outlet in the fictional rendition of experience - and here I mean fantasy as an imaginative dimension of experience as opposed to the referential element which features so strongly in original autobiographical and testimonial writing. As Felski (1989:83-84) points out, although women's fictional works all contain implicit autobiographical elements they also "superimpose a broader politically inspired pattern of meaning onto the representation of subjective experience".

18 I shall not embark on a psychoanalytical definition of "stereotype" here but refer to the traditional role ascribed to most women as either mothers, nuns or prostitutes (Bassnett 1987:250) and contrast the attitudes and actions of the female protagonists with these socially designated roles.

The **final question** demands: How successful has the strategy of modal subversion been and to what effect has it been used? Thus the concluding chapter, Chapter 6, evaluates the perceived success of the respective authors discussed in their manipulation of the picaresque. It also addresses the evolution in contemporary women's literature and attempts to justify women's recourse to fantasy as an alternative means of subversion. As fantasy is more objective, it could perhaps also be more persuasive but it would not necessarily negate the premise of referentiality because an alternate world could only be meaningful if it were to be formulated as either a deviation from or an emulation of some kind of the "real" world as we experience it.

To encapsulate, my argument in this thesis is posited on two main premises: firstly, the concept that **difference** is a valid criterion for cultural evaluation and constitutes a crucial element in the promotion of growth and development and, secondly, the assumption that literature - and in particular comparative literature - fulfils an important function in the promotion of differences in culture and gender, broadens perspectives and fosters intercultural relationships. Jean Franco (1986:41) also implies as much when she suggests that intertextuality provides a means of engaging with the "exclusions and marginalizations of the past".

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Culture, gender and marginalization

The main argument in this thesis is based on the premise that male and female perceptions of experience differ due to cultural impositions/influences and social conceptualizations of gender and identity. Although women had always been associated with domesticity and child rearing, several critics, among them Francine Masiello (1992:11), Mary Louise Pratt (1990:51) and Janet Wolff (1990:13), assert that social and political events in Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries had played an important role in entrenching the traditional perceptions of women and their relegation to the private sphere of experience.

In fact, one might well single out the advent of industrialization in the nineteenth century as one of the most important contributions to the invidious demarcation of experience into the private/domestic/feminine and public/social/masculine which is still evident in society today. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1983:28) maintains that "bourgeois ideology worked hand-in-glove with economic discrimination".¹ Thus the predominance of male experience and economic enterprise resulted in the exclusion of women from public life and their subsequent marginalization. As this social dichotomy was perceived in binary terms of opposition, it resulted in the stereotypical association of men with the rational and women with the emotional dimensions of experience.

It is seldom realized how insidious and invidious the influence of social conventions can be on the perceptions of identities and how the creation of social stereotypes can determine and perpetuate such conceptions. Francine Masiello (1992:2) openly blames cultural presuppositions for the artificial construction and inherent bias of social roles when she mentions

1 Industrialization brought a virtual end to family-run concerns and home industries - although ironically it could be argued that industrialization also "liberated" women to some extent from doing chores like baking and candle-making.

2

"the highly prominent role that gender plays in shaping these cultural *imaginings*" [my italics] and Janet Wolff (1990:1) also identifies culture as the main perpetrator of the perpetuation of social conventions and myths about women in society when she states unequivocally:

In the first place, I have taken it as given that culture is central to gender formation. Art, literature, and film do not simply represent given gender identities, or reproduce already existing ideologies of femininity. Rather they participate in the very construction of those identities. Second (and consequently), culture is a crucial arena for the contestation of the social arrangements of gender.

Although Wolff (1990:1) seems to refer here only to creative products of culture, such as "art, literature and film", other cultural constructs and institutions, such as history, education and politics would be equally susceptible to particular ideologies. In fact, the focus in this thesis will fall mainly on the interaction between literary/imaginative creation and historical context and its implications.

Due to the identified male/female social dichotomy, and the concomitant perpetuation of female stereotypes, an important part of human experience was denied and lost to society. It resulted in distorted perceptions of male and female identities because women were not adequately represented in history - or, were not given any recognition at all. As Wolff (1990:45) points out:

But the literature of modernity ignores the private sphere, and to that extent is silent on the subject of women's primary domain. This silence is not only detrimental to any understanding of the lives of the female sex; it obscures a crucial part of the lives of men, too, by abstracting one part of their experience and failing to explore the interrelation of private and public spheres. For men inhabited both of these.

This serves as an important reminder that not only men and women are deprived when a single dimension of experience is projected, but, as Lorna Irvine (1986:24) furthermore points out:

the absence of women's perspective within the culture, within the critical community and within the fictional universe affects contexts, and also affects the very structures of narratives.

It is this absence of female experience which has prompted women to write their "own life stories", reinscribe themselves into history and subvert the male literary canon. Rita Felski (1989:1) captures the essential dialectic expressed in feminist fiction when she asserts that it "can be understood as both a product of existing social conditions and a form of critical opposition to them".

Essentially, society should then be made aware of the dangers of perceiving difference or gender as a binary opposition and Michele Barrett (1985:83) clearly identifies this "other" face of difference when she cautions:

None the less [sic] the struggle over the *meaning* of gender is crucial. It is vital for our purposes to establish its meaning in contemporary capitalism as not simply 'difference', but as division, oppression, inequality, internalized inferiority for women. Cultural practice is an essential site of this struggle. It can play an incalculable role in the raising of consciousness and the transformation of our subjectivity.

Thus, any agenda of social reformation would have to address the negative influence of cultural presuppositions, promote cultural awareness and accommodate differences.

It would seem that the marginalization of women has been ubiquitous and has become a predominant issue in many societies. However, as this study mainly focuses on women's texts from Mexico, Chile and South Africa, the discussion will concentrate on the private and public spheres of

experience manifested in cultural institutions such as marriage and the family, and the role of the State and the Church in these countries.

Women have always been conscious of their peripheral position - a situation analogous to colonization - and have in various ways contested their subjection. Although a woman such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz² had already experienced the limitations of female existence in the seventeenth century in Mexico - when she had to choose between marriage or a life devoted to the church if she wanted to exercise her intellectual abilities - and women had also exercised influence in various domains in the nineteenth century in the Americas, as Franco (1989) and Masiello (1992) convincingly illustrate, feminism, as a conscious opposition to male domination, only evolved in the twentieth century.

Virginia Woolf's proclamation of a need for a "room of her own"³ at the beginning of the twentieth century echoed the sentiments of many women - it was, for instance, a need for independence that instigated the women's suffrage movement⁴ (Showalter, 1991:216) - but it was only in the 1960s that women became radically involved and actively started to resist male dominance. These protest actions also extended into the literary sphere where many publications in the 1970s and 1980s, some testimonial in nature, proclaimed social injustices and political oppression and clamoured for social and political equality. As Walker (1990:14-15) points out, it "provided them with the courage and motivation first to be writers and then to break out of traditional patriarchal forms and tell the stories of women in their own voices". However, as I explained in the Contextualization,

2 Johnson (1983:176) describes her as "the first pioneer of women's liberation in the Americas".

3 Virginia Woolf is often regarded as the initiator of an independent feminist consciousness which she introduced with her text, *A room of one's own*.

4 Although it must be acknowledged that the suffrage movement mainly focused on the right for women to vote - to be represented in Parliament - and did not address all women's rights. This especially true of the South African movement, as Rhoda Kadalie (1994:25) notes.

the feminist⁵ stance which characterized the 1960s and 1970s has evolved into a more nuanced and sophisticated (though no less assertive and definite) female stance during the 1980s and 1990s.

In Latin America,⁶ the evolution of a female autonomy/consciousness can be traced in various critical texts⁷ which indicate a correspondence in the cultural conditions prevalent in most Latin American countries. This fact, together with Ann Pescatello's (1973:xiii) and Rama's (1981:17) acknowledgements that cultural generalizations are acceptable in Latin America, has prompted me to discuss the following cultural traditions as pertinent to most Latin American countries in general and even to extend their relevance to a postcolonial country like South Africa.

It would seem that the main institutions which have been responsible for the sustained, circumscribed social mobility of women, have been the family, the Church and the State - all dominated by men. Both Masiello (1992) and Franco (1989) discuss the influence of these institutions and their effects in Latin America - which are still evident and clearly illustrated in the lives of the respective protagonists in the contemporary texts to be discussed: *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* by Elena Poniatowska from Mexico, and *Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende from Chile.

Johnson (1983:186) circumscribes the influence of the Catholic Church on women's lives when she accuses it of perpetuating female subjugation and states that it "not only dictated specific images but controlled the lives and

5 I shall adhere to Elaine Showalter's (1991) use of these terms in my discussion of "feminism".

6 The designation "Latin America" is used in this thesis to refer to the nineteen Spanish-speaking countries of the Americas. Although Brazil and the French-speaking countries are included in the term "Latin America", they are not encompassed in this study.

7 The most representative seem to be, in alphabetical order, Jean Franco's (1989) professional rendition of culture and gender conditions in Mexico, Jane Jaquette's (1989) critical survey of the Women's Movement in Latin America, Johnson's (1983) survey of women's images in the colonial literature of Spanish America (1492-1800) and Masiello's (1992) study of female strategic resistance in Argentinian society and literature.

destinies of the learned sector of the female population as well".⁸ This question of the disparity between male and female education was still pertinent in 1988 when Marjorie Agosin (1988:21) referred to it. Furthermore, the Church also extended its influence to the family where the subjugation of women was also encouraged. Great emphasis was placed on the father as the undisputed head of the family where his dominant role was further reinforced by the ideology of "machismo"⁹ (Duncan, 1976:104-105; Bassnett, 1987:248) which ensured his complete social freedom outside the home (Olien, 1973:217) and often included overtly condoned extra-marital relations. Evelyn Stevens (1973:90) notes that, in male relationships, *machismo* is demonstrated by intransigence and exaggerated aggressiveness, while this attitude is characterized by a display of arrogance and sexual aggression in relationships with women.

However, a woman was expected to be faithful, often even after the death of her husband (Johnson 1983:48; Evelyn Stevens 1973:95) - this situation would then explain Celia Correas de Zapata's (1980:36) apt metaphor for marriage as a prison. Wives were, and still are in many countries, expected to be irreproachable "mothers of the nation" and as the Catholic Church has consistently and vehemently prohibited couples from practising birth control, women have been and still are helplessly shackled to their domestic responsibilities and children. Apart from the Catholic Church and its influence on private lives in Latin America, the State also ensured women's subservience by denying them any significant education and political rights (Guerra Cunningham 1989b:144; Johnson 1983:6) - these were only obtained in the early twentieth century. Consequently, a cast-iron hierarchy of family patriarchs, church fathers and male political leaders ensured the perpetuation of female oppression in Latin America.

8 This accusation is also reiterated by Correas de Zapata (1980:37).

9 Coddou (1986:41) mentions that *machismo* was a mode of conduct attributed to men in the fifteenth-century Spain whose virility was measured against their prowess in the seduction and conquest of women - this was the origin of the famous myth of Don Juan. It was continued in Latin America where not only women but also nature, within the colonial context, needed to be conquered and dominated.

General critical texts on women's writing in South Africa are not prolific, but Cherry Clayton's (1989) anthology on women's writing in South Africa provides a good example of the different exponents. Several articles on specific texts by women critics such as Margaret Daymond, Dorothy Driver and Margaret Lenta have also contributed to a critical perception of women's writing. Traditional concepts of the family unit and women as "mothers of the nation" were also prevalent in Afrikaner culture and women's lives were, to a large extent, also regulated by religious doctrines.¹⁰ The emphasis on respectability, the fear of miscegenation and the dearth of marriageable women in the early years of colonial government also induced the government to ship out additional "surplus" women to the colonies to act as "help"mates to the men but, in reality they became sexual objects and chattels (Driver 1988:7). Both Brink (1983:19) and Sparks (1990:153) point out how Church interference in South Africa had also extended to politics in that the [Afrikaans Protestant] Church not only condoned but reinforced the policy of apartheid by establishing separate places of worship for whites and blacks. The repressive role of the Government and its racist policy of apartheid in South Africa are also illustrated in the texts of *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena* by Elsa Joubert and *A sport of nature* by Nadine Gordimer.

Another contentious issue and example of double standards could be seen in the Latin American and South African societies' conventional attitude towards prostitution. Female independence was regarded as a threat to the stability of the State and the family (Johnson 1983:108) and consequently prostitution as a female "profession" and an economic concern was condemned by society on moral grounds. However, it was conveniently forgotten that such a practice was instituted in the first place because women were economically dependent on men and unless they enjoyed the protection of marriage or the convent - in Latin America - they could hardly subsist on their own. Thus it became a question of barter: exchanging sexual favours for money/independence or, as Smith (1989:20) states, woman became an "object of exchange within a male economy".

10 This fact is corroborated by Du Toit and Krog (1994:24) who also point out the male manipulation of female images.

The fact that prostitution is still a thriving "profession" in most countries today only serves to underline the ambiguous position of women and the spurious attitude of the dominant male establishment. It has become a case of using the weakness of others for the benefit of some, subverting the *status quo*, and this situation is graphically illustrated in the texts mentioned above. Masiello (1992:142) correctly summarizes the situation when she states that "Respectability [sic] was thus created to serve the needs of the state, while sexual fantasies were projected onto women, subalterns and racial 'others'".

The hegemony of the Church became less predominant with the secularization of society and nationalism replaced religious doctrine to a certain extent in the nineteenth century. However, gender was still cleverly manipulated by the systems in power to reinforce their political image so that when nationalism needed to be propagated and in crisis situations like in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), women attained the image of "mothers of the nation"¹¹ but they still retained a subservient role in society and politics. However, as soon as women became too independent and obtrusive in political and social life they were considered to have subversive intentions. For example, Susan Faludi (1991) paints a bleak picture of contemporary American women's social situation in her book entitled, *Backlash: the undeclared war against American women*. She gives various examples of subtle prejudice and open antagonism towards women who dare to claim social and sexual equality and thus perhaps infringe on male preserves. This resentment of women in competitive positions and antifeminism is prevalent in various spheres of contemporary society but it is especially propagated through such media as the movies, television and fashion; it is also still evident in politics and many professions.

11 It should be noted here that, in contrast to *machismo*, the term *marianismo* has been coined to indicate "the cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men" (Stevens 1973:91). It originally derives from Maria or Mary, the mother of Jesus and is prevalent in mestizo social classes but in literature it has a secular connotation pertaining to the position of women in society.

Johnson (1983:186) and various other critics such as Birgit Brock-Utne (1989:499) also blame women themselves for their own uncritical attitudes towards the male system which ensured their subservience, their endorsement of the male values of femininity and their critical attitudes towards their "rebel" sisters. In an analysis of eight novels written by four African women, Nancy Topping Bazin (1985:183) points out that it is primarily "the weight of custom" that is responsible for women's suffering, degradation and their subjugation to family pressures. Although she notes the irony involved in women's acquiescence to male authority, she also remarks on women's resilience and courage and urges the need for united action against oppression (Bazin, 1985:195) in order to obtain freedom of choice.

Evelyn Stevens (1973:98) suggests that women keep on perpetuating negative images of themselves because they experience some kind of liberation through it and subsequently concludes that women are "not yet ready to relinquish their female chauvinism" (Evelyn Stevens 1973:100). This remark seems very appropriate when the position and depiction of prostitutes come to mind in Allende's texts *The house of the spirits* and *Eva Luna*, as well as Gordimer's depiction of Hillela Capran in *A sport of nature*.

In mitigation of the entrenched patriarchal values, Johnson (1983:48) mentions that fear of the unknown in the New World and "the continual threat of warfare" could have contributed to the male's dominant role as master of his house/castle and the woman's duty as keeper of the family and hearth. However, this seems no excuse for a tyrannical dominance and completely underestimates women's courage and resilience. Smith-Rosenberg (1983:31) also strenuously objects to this perception of women as "dumb players" and insists that we should view "history as an ongoing struggle between women and men actors for control of the script" - for this purpose, we only need to identify the sources of power which women can utilize.

In most Latin American countries and postcolonial countries like South Africa, women have played an important role in the struggle for liberation. Franco (1989:102) refers to the role of women during the Mexican

Revolution when she mentions that "Women had followed armies, fought, fled from their homes, lost their men, survived, had nursed and fed troops". Her statement is exemplified in Poniatowska's protagonist, Jesusa Palancares, who actively participates in the war by assisting her husband with ammunition and later even assumes the leadership of her husband's company when he is killed. Accounts of the Boer Wars in South Africa also recall courageous exploits of Afrikaner women who seemed to be well able to fend for themselves and actively subvert British authority by providing food and shelter to the Boer commandos at the risk of their lives.

Although women in Latin America had been involved in various movements¹² and demonstrations for political and economic rights, Patricia Chuchryk (1993:150) indicates that women in Chile, for instance, had not regarded gender discrimination as a valid issue until the 1970s and 1980s. Jean Franco (1992:66) ascribes this belated interest in "feminist" issues to the exigencies of authoritarian regimes and the poverty incurred by the debt crisis in Latin America. A notable result of political oppression and poverty was the collaboration of women to form groups for survival purposes such as the Association of Families¹³ in Chile and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Franco 1992:67)¹⁴ in Buenos Aires. When their personal lives and families were threatened and affected, women were forced to take action and protest in public against inhuman oppression. Thus, of necessity, the personal became public. These survival movements then first aroused an "awareness of women's oppression (Franco 1992:68) which has gained sufficient momentum for Amy Kaminsky (1993:xii) to note quite recently, that "currently, feminist

- 12 This term is used to indicate the collective effort initiated by Latin American women in different countries in opposition to military rule and the exigencies of poverty and not specifically to designate "feminism" as a movement. Chuchryk (1989:154) is very clear on this point when she refers to these movements as strategies for survival and self-empowerment.
- 13 This group was formed to support the families of the "disappeared" by encouraging them to sew their stories onto wall hangings, *arpilleras*, in silent denunciation of government oppression, and to sell them outside Chile (Agosin 1988:12).
- 14 Masiello (1992:1) notes that over 15,000 citizens between 1976 and 1983 had "disappeared" in Argentina.

criticism is becoming more visible to and legitimate among Latin Americanists".

Detention of people without trial was a mechanism of oppression by authoritarian governments in several countries in Latin America: among others, Mexico, Argentina and Chile as well as in South Africa.¹⁵ Consequently, an analogy exists between the arbitrary detention of people suspected of collaborating against the Apartheid System in South Africa and the "disappeared" persons in Latin America. Many black youths were detained without trial in South Africa and their families remained uninformed of their whereabouts. Ellen Kuzwayo (1987:46) reminds us that

The mothers who carry an unending pain are those whose daughters and sons were mowed down by the police and have disappeared from the surface of the earth. There are mothers in Soweto who would give anything just to know whether their children died in the 1976 schools unrest, whether they died in jail, or whether they left the country.

Women have always supported male enterprise and it is worth noting that the African National Congress-dominated government of South Africa has finally begun to pay back their debts for the unstinting support they received from their women during the liberation struggle and have instigated active measures to elevate the status of women in society.

A certain similarity then seems to exist in "difference" within and between the widely disparate communities of Latin America and South Africa. Despite the efforts at renewal, attempts to acknowledge human rights and the activities of liberation movements which evolved after the Second World War, the impact of colonization is still evident today - near the end of the twentieth century. Prejudice about women is still prevalent in many spheres of society today, for example, composite works on authors often

15 In South Africa, black women who objected to the introduction of passbooks in the 1950s were summarily imprisoned (Kadalie 1994:25).

exclude women authors or else grudgingly admit their existence (Taiwo, 1984:ix)¹⁶. Thus, despite women's attempts to bridge the social gap between male and female experience in various ways, to renounce their subjugation and to claim social equality, Castillo (1992:10) maintains that in Latin America the concept of

woman is still largely a shadow construct. The independent existence of women, though real, is still perceived as a fiction, as an imaginary, incomplete derivative of the self-duplication - the derivative of Adam's rib, the Freudian castrate, the Jungian anima - of an overwhelmingly male ideological frame. To assume otherwise, to allow for a woman's independence of self-possession, would require the complete recalculation of an entire economic and philosophical system.

This discrimination is also evident within women's ranks in South Africa where black women are only now emerging as writers while, as Cherry Clayton (1989:2) remarks, white women "make up a highly visible part of any line-up of South African authors". Women still have to contend with sexual abuse and are subjected to the will of their husbands; suffer illegal abortions and are forced to practice prostitution for survival with no legal rights or protection in many countries. Mohanty et al. (1991:23) indicate that women and marginalized communities today still have to combat laws on immigration and questions of nationality and she correlates this situation with "women's struggles against colonial occupation". Finally, Ellen Kuzwayo (1987:124) recognizes the commonality of women's oppression when she confesses that "Day by day I realised I was being humiliated and degraded, an experience I have in recent years come to realize is suffered by many wives the world over, within different races, cultures and religions".

16 Although Taiwo (1984:ix) refers to African women in particular, women are also glaringly absent from literary collections in the Americas and South Africa.

It would then seem that a re-education of society is necessary because, as López González (1988:14) stresses, women cannot function in a vacuum and therefore women studies could contribute to the final attainment of

una sociedad verdaderamente humanizada cuya condición fundamental sea la igualdad real de todos los seres humanos, el respeto a la diversidad cultural y a la vida en sus diferentes manifestaciones.¹⁷

Bazin (1985:192) also urges that the culture has to change and not the individual. She refers to Bessie Head's perception of oppression as "a question of power" (Bazin, 1985:187)¹⁸ in various spheres of society whether in racial or sexual oppression. The fact that power is a corruptible force also underlies Nadine Gordimer's text, *A sport of nature*.

However, it is not the difference between male and female experience that is disputed by women, but it is their absence from history and literature and the dominance of the male perspective and masculine norms of judgement that rankle women such as Elizabeth Janeway (1979:342) who observes that "the norms of our culture are based on masculine experience and adapted to male roles and behaviour". Women functioning as a peripheral group, question the validity of traditional boundaries. While they have suffered the same fate as other minority groups and in the erstwhile colonies, indigenous women have been subjected to an additional burden of political oppression.¹⁹

17 Translation: a truly humanized society whose fundamental principle would be the real equality of all human beings and a respect for cultural diversity and life in all its different manifestations.

18 She is referring here to Head's novel entitled *A question of power*.

19 Julie Greer Johnson (1983:46) cites various recorded instances of cruelty to indigenous women by both Spanish men and women in the early chronicles - a double subjugation.

1.2 Difference, colonialism, and exile

The colonial context which "remains a prerequisite to an understanding of contemporary political life" (Needler 1963:10) and literature, constitutes a crucial factor in the analysis of a culture and the ramifications of oppression. Latin America and South Africa have both been shaped by the forces of political oppression and racial discrimination emanating from colonial rule; the influence of religious doctrines; the impact of natural environment and the isolation of vast tracts of land. Within this framework, the dichotomy between private and public or female and male experience is further emphasized by differences between European and indigenous²⁰ cultures.

The perception of culture as a dynamic process of social interaction supports the notion of **difference** as a regenerative instead of divisive influence. Narvaéz (1986:279) stresses the interaction of culture with social **context** when he asserts that "Las transformaciones [sic] sociales básicas generan *en consecuencia* dialécticamente una transformación cultural".²¹ Thus **context** and **difference** should be pertinent considerations in any interpretation/consideration of culture²² and by implication, literature as a cultural construct.

Although several critics (Ainsa, 1986:37; Marañón, 1984:39 and Yurkievich, 1986:3) also perceive culture in this sense, Eliot (1948:56) has perhaps come the closest in capturing this ineffable quality of culture when he maintains that

20 The term "indigenous" is used here to refer in general to the original inhabitants of Latin America and South Africa.

21 Translation: Basic social transformation, in effect, generates a dialectic of cultural transformation.

22 Yurkievich (1986:3) also emphasizes these aspects of culture when he claims that "afirmar la identidad implica destacar la diferencia" [to affirm identity means to recognize difference].

A people is judged by history according to its contribution to the culture of other peoples flourishing at the same time and according to its contribution to the cultures which arise afterwards.

This definition is an implicit acknowledgement of cultural diversity or **difference**²³ which acts as an incentive for development and growth within a specific historical context. Colonization in any form therefore impedes the natural evolution of cultural identity because, as Yurkievich (1986:3) asserts: "Cultura abierta, cultura activa, cultura viva, puede en gran parte autoabastecerse y autogenerarse".²⁴ Eliot (1948:64-65) spells out the consequences of cultural repression when he reduces it to the level of human relationships, claiming that

It is human, when we do not understand another human being, and cannot ignore him, to exert an unconscious pressure on that person to turn him into something that we can understand: many husbands and wives exert this pressure on each other. The effect on the person so influenced is liable to be the repression and distortion, rather than the improvement, of the personality; and no man is good enough to have the right to make another over in his own image.

This sentiment is shared by Fornet (1986:343) who gives it a slightly more universal slant, emphasizing the value of difference when he claims that

cada hombre responde por todos los hombres y viceversa; ninguno puede ser tratado como objeto sin que se degrade con ello a toda la humanidad. Para que ese imperativo moral, tan viejo como el cristianismo, no se diluya en una identidad abstracta, es preciso tener en cuenta las diferencias que nos permitan ver mejor las semejanzas, porque cada individuo es también el resultado de una

23 Although Eliot implies that change is the keyword in cultural evolution I have incorporated it in the concept of **difference** because it fosters change.

24 Translation: A culture which is open, active and alive can be, to a great extent, self-sufficient and self-generating.

historia, una cultura, una ideología, una determinada clase o grupo social.²⁵

Resistance must then inevitably follow domination in order to assert personal and cultural identity. Ainsa (1986:38) interprets this as a natural defensive gesture because, as he explains: "La afirmación de la identidad es una forma de autodefensa, ya que la 'diferencia' aparece siempre como una posible amenaza".²⁶ With this comment he touches on a very important point, because the interpretation of **difference** depends on the perspective from which it is viewed. For example, Yurkievich (1986:3) seems to contradict this opinion when he states that the affirmation of identity implies the recognition of difference. Yet, what is inferred in both cases, is the accommodation of difference as a quality of culture. Thus, whereas Eliot (1948:53) propagates the expansion of existing cultures by incorporating other traditions and growing "a contemporary culture from the old roots", Roggiano (1986:11) advocates multiplurality when he insists that

Por ejemplo, hoy parece quedar en claro que una identidad cultural puede corresponder a una pluralidad étnica o que una unidad étnica puede manifestarse en una variedad cultural.²⁷

However, the acknowledgement of **difference** remains a central concept of cultural growth and it must therefore be kept in mind that culture has a positive aspect which thrives on **difference** but that an overemphasis of **difference** could also result in alienation, for instance, the marginalization

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- 25 Translation: each man responds through all men and vice versa; no one can be treated as an object without degrading all of humanity with him. To avoid that this moral imperative, as old as Christianity, should become diluted into an abstraction, it is necessary to take into account the differences which allow us to better see the similarities, because each individual is also the result of a history, a culture, an ideology, a specific class or social group.
- 26 Translation: The affirmation of identity is a form of self-defence especially since "difference" always appears to be a lurking threat.
- 27 Translation: For example, today it seems clear that a cultural identity can correspond to ethnic plurality or that ethnic unity can manifest itself in cultural variety.

of women and colonization of minorities.²⁸ Consequently, a careful balance has to be maintained to avoid another kind of "recolonization" which could emanate from over-zealous "nationalization" or, the concept of the "ideal community" as Young (1990:300) describes it. Needler (1963:2) also cautions against exclusivity when, in a comparison of different countries, he states that emphasis on similarity could overlook significant variations/differences between individual countries while the focus on differences could lead to repetition. This concept is perhaps best illustrated by the establishment of Bantustans in South Africa (Sparks 1990:194) where the blacks or indigenous population were supposed to develop according to their customs but were at the same time denied access to quality education. Thus **difference** was propagated but to the detriment of the indigenous peoples.

The influence of cultural conditions on social perceptions is clearly illustrated by Jean Franco (1973:3) when she uses the term "colonized" imagination to denote the restrictive influence that Spanish conventions, literary and other, had on the Latin American mind - the "decolonization" of the imagination would only take place in the struggle for independence in the early nineteenth century. She (Franco 1973:21) refers to the two contradictory myths imposed on Latin America by the colonizing forces which led to a further confusion in the possible attainment of a national identity, namely, their perception as being simultaneously "noble savage[s]" and "inferior peoples". These contradictory perceptions, which can be ascribed to an ambivalence in attitude towards the mixture of races in both the Latin American and South African contexts, are also addressed and analysed by Mary Louise Pratt (1990:61) who maintains that

On one hand, there is a sincere effort to come to grips with the reality of indigenous life and incorporate it into national self-understanding. On the other hand, an exoticist tendency distances,

28 Here, colonization is regarded as synonymous with cultural domination. Chandra Mohanty (1984:333) explains that "colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression - often violent - of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question".

objectifies, and dehumanizes the indigenous peoples in a decidedly nonfraternal way.

It is then with the conception of **difference** as an agent for competition/improvement and conciliation, and not separation, that the female dilemma is explored in this thesis.

It must be accepted that differences among people are evident in various spheres of society and such differences cannot be relegated simply to ethnicity or gender alone because as Duncan (1976:121) stresses, "ethnic and cultural-racial relations, with their corresponding cultures are not of homogeneous consistency. People do not identify themselves with a single group". This is also applicable to the diversity perceived in women's ranks and noted by Felski (1989:10) who states unequivocally that

women are never only feminists but also many other things as well, resulting in a diversity of standpoints influenced by other forms of affiliation in relation to class, nationality, race, sexual preference, and so on.

Consequently, the postcolonial context poses a complex interrelationship of different kinds of oppression. This recognition, however, has significant implications for feminism in general, as its very construction suggests an ideal of community (Young 1990:300) which, similar to nationalism, spells exclusivity. This criticism is all the more pertinent when the situation of Third World women is addressed as these women do not identify themselves with their imperialist "sisters". In fact, they regard their lives conditioned by slavery, colonialism and racism to be significantly different from those of white women. As López González (1988:12) avers, women who are from an ethnic minority and Third World countries are caught in a stranglehold of oppression through

Sexo, nación, raza, clase, conforman un complejo cinturón de opresión que aprieta más fuerte, y en todos los casos, a la histórica

víctima de la sociedad patriarcal, estrangulada aún más en las sociedades clasistas.²⁹

For indigenous women, their struggle for female independence has mostly been subsumed by political liberation movements in colonized countries. Jean Franco (1989:xi) takes care to emphasize that

it is precisely Third World women who have insisted not only that there are differences *between* women but also that there are circumstances in which women's emancipation is bound up with the fate of the larger community.

In view of the political circumstances which have prevailed in both Latin America and South Africa during the second half of the twentieth century, the suspicious attitude of indigenous women towards European feminism could have been justified and have acted as a necessary strategy for survival. Political - and in the case of South Africa, racial oppression - was so severe, threatening both men and women, that female concerns might have appeared petty in the extreme. The wave of political upheavals which swept Latin America in the 1970s was introduced by military coups in Chile (1973), Uruguay (1973) Argentina (1976) in which people were unjustly imprisoned, tortured, exiled or simply eradicated without trace. This irrational situation is very well depicted in the film about the Argentine student riots in 1976, "Night of the Pencils" directed by Hector Oliveira. Various accounts of the torture and sexual abuse which were suffered are given in the letters and testimonies which Alicia Partnoy (1989:12) has collected from exiled Latin American women leaders and artists who were all "victims of repression".

In South Africa, black women have been generally suspicious of feminism and have associated it with white bourgeois ideals and imperialism and have also interpreted it as being anti-men and family (Mathiane 1994:9). It

29 Translation: Sex, nationality, race and class form a complete girdle of oppression which fiercely constricts, in every situation, the historical victim of patriarchal society, who is even more strangled in class-conscious societies.

must also be noted, as Rhoda Kadalie (1994:25) states, that black women in South Africa have been particularly affected by the process of industrialization because their men had left home to work in the industrial areas and the women had to cope with all the domestic responsibilities which undermined the family as a unit. Although white women mostly acted as mediators rather than perpetrators of colonialism (Haggis 1990),³⁰ it does not excuse their culpability with regard to cultural domination. This opinion is also endorsed by Rice-Sayre (1986:66-67) who asserts that although no individual can be held responsible for creating "the racist or sexist policies imbricated in our institutions", it does not exempt the individual from condemnation for perpetuating/tolerating the system. It is this fact that induces Visel (1988a:39) to assert that the "white settler woman can best be described as half-colonized". Questions of guilt, discrimination and responsibility have featured in various contemporary South African novels by authors such as André Brink, J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer.

One of the most invidious and searing effects of racism in South Africa has been the tragedy resulting from a partial acceptance into society: by being given a "white" education and then relegated to the ranks of oblivion again. This is graphically illustrated in the life of the author Bessie Head who belonged to both worlds: the white world of education and the black world of racial discrimination or, as Gillian Stead Eilersen (1991:46) terms it, "the shadowy no-man's-land of the 'colored'". Unable to cope with dual roles in a divided society, she succumbed to insanity at one stage in her life. This experience is recounted in her novel *A question of power*.

Head (1984:278) identifies the sense of hopelessness experienced by most urban blacks to be due to the lack of "a sense of roots" and "a sense of history" and regards it as one of the most important results of cultural domination in South Africa. With this statement she implies that roots and history supply an identity and that, concomitant with identity comes human dignity which requires conscious restitution.³¹

30 Dorothy Driver (1988:17) refers to South African women in the same capacity: as mediators between the races.

Illustrations like these serve as basis for indigenous women's distrust of white feminism in colonial territories because of the disparity in their experiences. Their experiences clearly spell out the implications of cultural impositions which cause Shula Marks (1989:47) to admit that for postcolonial societies "it is disturbing to have to confront the enormous price tag of history".

Exile then also exists in the mind as the life story of Bessie Head clearly illustrates and spiritual anguish becomes synonymous with the "silence imposed from without, through exile, torture, and oppressive social restrictions and gender roles" (Ross 1991:16). Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (1989) also use the metaphor of exile to describe women's writing because as Angela Ingram (1989:4) asserts, "exile [is] in some circumstances as much metaphor as it is material circumstance".

A certain historical distance is often required to obtain perspective and to recognize the injustices of a society.³² As Crehan (1993:9) correctly observes, critical distance and hindsight are invaluable assets in literary interpretation because

As we have seen, contextualising that which is still current is often driven by a need to legitimise a particular political ideology, or to patronise and provide some kind of apology for mediocre or ephemeral works, which is the antithesis of the New-Historicist approach.

Aware of the dangers of historical proximity, André Brink has also often used historical perspective as a distancing device for the reader. For instance, his novel *An instant in the wind* is situated in the early years of the Cape Colony so that the reader does not feel personal responsibility and

31 This would explain the policy of Affirmative Action being implemented in South Africa today. It is being instituted to benefit the socially deprived in our communities. The white population are called upon to support this act of restitution and to confess that the policy of apartheid had been wrong.

32 Several authors comment on this reality (Allende 1988a:78; Kaminsky 1993:33).

tends to judge before she/he realizes her/his own complicity in the perpetuation and perpetration of a situation or an ideology. Thus the devastation caused by imperialism and its aftermath can only be placed in perspective from a distance through time and the Afrikaans author Elsa Joubert (1984:58) confesses that her awareness of an imbalance in power first emerged when she left the country:

Being physically beyond the frontiers of the country brought a new awareness and caused the vague unrest and uncertainty about the social and political anomalies at home to grow into something much deeper and more disquieting.

Exiles who had suffered from the idiosyncracies/irrationality of an authoritarian political regime probably experienced these sentiments even more acutely and would have had to rely on memory to conjure up their poignant past and attempt to find some measure of comfort in writing about their experiences.³³ Like Allende, Mohanty (1991:38) reminds us that "Resistance is encoded in the practices of remembering, and of writing". This constitutes the basis of testimonial writing.

Thus women such as Rigoberta Menchú, Josefina Bórquez - alias Jesusa Palancares, the protagonist of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* - Poppie Nongena, the alleged interviewee of Elsa Joubert's *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena*, as well as Domitila Barrios de Chungara - the peasant woman from the Bolivian mines - serve as examples of a multiple marginalization. They are indigent indigenous women in postcolonial settings who, despite many sacrifices for liberation, have received little compensation for their pains.

Similar to South African black women, black feminists in America also believe that the politics of sex, race and class are inextricably linked and

33 Kaminsky (1993:29) describes exile as "a particular form of presence-in-absence" and continues to explain that "It thus carries something of the place departed and of the historical circumstance of that place at the moment of departure, making the exiled person no longer present in the place departed, but not a part of the new place either" (Kaminsky 1993:30).

Angela Gilliam (1991:225) accuses white feminists of "tunnel" vision because she maintains that the issues of race and class "intersect the issue of gender" and suggests that women "have to struggle on the basis of *issues* rather than gender, ethnicity, or sexual preference" (Gilliam 1991:230). Political and economic issues cannot be ignored by indigenous and Third World women and Chandra Mohanty (1991:7) briefly sketches their main objections when she explains that "Feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of shortsightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia".

Seen from this perspective, the justification for a feminist aesthetics has often been questioned and still remains a contentious issue. While the male contingent of writers has questioned the validity of feminism as a distinctive discipline, women critics have also questioned its hegemonic character, or the exclusivity underlying such an aesthetics. However, due to a shift in paradigm - largely related to politically-oriented liberation strategies - the postmodernist condition promotes the recognition of differences as a valid point of orientation and thereby, propitiously, accommodates and acknowledges the plight of women and minorities in contemporary society.

Although the liberation struggle has been a predominant issue and might serve as a valid argument, it seems that, in the process, the indigenous women have also relinquished a claim to female autonomy.³⁴ Castillo (1992:19) warns that intransigence on class and racial issues could cloud and stagnate "an urgently required political agenda" for women. This point is also raised in my discussion of Nadine Gordimer's attitude towards feminism and it is underlined by Alicia Partnoy's (1989:12) bitter complaint that female participation in the liberation struggle has gone

34 Kadalie (1994:26) also raises this issue and maintains that "black women in democratic organizations have recently come to realize that they have much to lose by ignoring the contributions feminists have made and that much of their own history has been strongly feminist".

unrecognized and women's rights have remained peripheral. She asserts that

Latin American women have claimed recognition as participants in the political lives of our countries. However, we still encounter discrimination: for those of us who have risked our lives for political and social change, there is seldom a position of power available in government. Yet, there is one realm in which we have not faced discrimination: Repression.

Susan Andrade (1990:91) acknowledges the double absence of African women from history but she maintains that they cannot deny their links with white feminists and should rather build beyond such associations. She avers that gender has been subsumed by race in the agenda of indigenous women which has led to the conflation of categories and subsequent elision of "the gendered and racial violence to which female natives are subjected" and most importantly, it has induced exclusive readings of texts.³⁵

Despite her critical stance on political conditions in South Africa, Jean Pease, a black school teacher and anti-apartheid activist, tells Diana Russell (Russell 1989:165) that she recognizes women's rights as an independent issue in the liberation struggle which should not simply be dismissed as "a divisive white, Western, bourgeois movement". Pease (Russell 1989:165) maintains that such attitudes

protect male domination. Although fighting racism is an understandable and commendable priority in South Africa, more people need to recognize that this doesn't mean that other forms of oppression should be ignored.

It would then seem that women from all cultures and races should take stock of their historical situation and, as Chaudhuri and Strobel (1990:293) urge, re-view the colonial situation within the framework of the political realities which still evince a persistence in cultural and patriarchal

35 Andrade (1990:93) refers specifically to Jan Mohamed's reading of works by Isak Dinesen and Nadine Gordimer.

domination. They (Chaudhuri & Strobel 1990:290) point to the need for a new look at women and imperialism:

as feminism matured as a social movement, the numerically dominant white practitioners have been forced to evaluate their/our complicity in the imperial and domestic exploitations of the past and present. For those of us who are white and European or North American, the study of Western women and imperialism is part of a process of studying not only the Other, but ourselves - and ourselves operating in less-than-politically-correct modes.

Chaudhuri and Strobal (1990:290) also stress the importance of the interaction of cultures and of women among women. This sentiment is echoed by Brock-Utne (1989:495) when she proposes that women "belonging to affluent oppressor countries, look to third world people for guidance" in their own liberation. Nancy Miller (1988:110) also argues in these terms when she suggests that the slogan the "personal is the political" should be redefined "to include most immediately an interrogation of ethnocentrism; a poetics of identity that engages with the 'other' woman". This would be particularly applicable to a comparison of postcolonial territories with divergent cultures and multiple forms of oppression which should, of necessity, distinguish between gender and class and race when a feminist criticism is proposed. Ann Russo (1991:301) clearly spells out the pertinent issues obstructing feminist "solidarity" when she states that "representation, accountability, responsibility, and equal sharing of power and control continue to be major problems in feminist organizing".

Thus the main problem facing a "feminist" approach resides in negotiating differences and emphasizing similarities. Perhaps the establishment of a meeting ground on common matters of concern could diminish differences because an expanded consciousness signifies a broader perspective.

1.3 Feminism and pluralism

Castillo (1992:10) identifies one of the main impediments to women's co-operation when she points out that "the problem of a continuing colonialism in some realms intersects with postcolonial structures in others". It is argued by several feminist critics³⁶ that this situation could be resolved by perceiving gender **difference** as a relational concept which is informed by a hierarchy of relationships and interactions between relationships instead of a fixed binary opposition. It would promote the underlying relations between concepts as Joan Scott (1988:37) succinctly states:

fixed oppositions conceal the extent to which things presented as oppositional are, in fact, interdependent - that is, they derive their meaning from a particularly established contrast rather than from some inherent or pure antithesis.

As far as feminism is concerned, the acknowledgement of difference then creates scope for "a more international geo-graphics in feminist writing" (Miller 1988:17-18) while binary oppositions suggest a narrowing process. The Personal Narratives Group (1989:19) also stress this aspect of difference when they maintain that

feminist thinking has expanded its initial theoretical stance that emphasized the commonality of all women by reason of gender to incorporate a greater recognition and appreciation of differences among women. If women share a common need to negotiate their way through varieties of patriarchy, the particular conditions that prevail in any society - the contexts that both constrain and give meaning to women's lives - vary enormously.

Feminism should then consider alternative approaches to gender, as Haggis (1990:14) contends, and challenge fundamental assumptions by not merely inverting or confirming old hierarchies and dominant ideologies (Scott

36 Among others: Jane Haggis (1990); Nancy Miller (1988) and Joan Scott (1988).

1988:33-34). Or, to formulate it in another way, Kathleen Barry (1989:562) suggests that

The challenge facing a praxis-based feminist theory is to confront the *political* power base of gender construction by finding the commonality among women in their diversity without imposing upon them preconstructed categories that determine their identity.

An approach would also allay Chandra Mohanty's (1984) fears that feminism, as it is understood in European circles, does not provide adequate provision for the needs of marginalized women but only constitutes a new form of "colonization".

Differences between women from different cultures should not be an impediment but rather serve to point to the variety of social structures responsible for difference. Feminism can be expanded to incorporate a variety of perspectives in order to be democratically-oriented or, as Haggis (1990:114) maintains, it should identify "a context within which multiple voices are picked up to build a coherent picture in terrorist³⁷ terms" (Haggis 1990:114). Racism alone should not be held accountable for patriarchal dominance. White women and black women may differ socially but despite their privileged positions, European women also have a right to voice their grievances. In addition, their efforts to expose the plight of less fortunate, and often illiterate women should be recognized and appreciated as conciliatory overtures. Their class privilege should not negate their marginalization as second class citizens. As Barry (1989:565) argues:

If race cohesion gives women of color collective experiential reality of one aspect of domination, how does that enable or prohibit their recognition of collective sex-class identity as women?

37 I have interpreted the term "terrorist" to mean subversive or counteractive to hegemonic discourse.

Such an inclusive approach to feminism would incorporate the main ideas of both the French and Anglo-American branches of feminism. Whereas the French feminists accept the "moral equality of women and men with an explicit acknowledgement of differences in women's and men's sexual functions in society" (Offen 1988:139) and literature, the Anglo-American feminists dismiss "socially defined" roles for the sexes and claim individual independence (Offen 1988:138) and experience. Both branches of feminism challenge patriarchal domination and the subordination of women but they are not necessarily anti-men. As Offen (1988:151) states: "It [feminism] seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy but not sexual dualism". Rita Felski (1989:6) succinctly summarizes the scope of these two approaches, firstly the French and then the Anglo-American, when she describes them respectively as

an aesthetically self-conscious experimental writing which challenges stylistic conventions and calls into question established modes of representation but which as a result of this esotericism remains accessible only to a minority, or an instrumental aesthetic which seeks to relate literature to the lives of large numbers of women, stresses the issue of political content, and consequently fails to address the specificity of forms of literary signification.

Although Latin American Feminism cannot really be compared with the European feminisms, it would probably come closer to the French body politics because it displays "a return to the concrete" as Amy Amy Kaminsky (1993:135) declares.

However, contemporary feminism seems to accommodate both these perspectives as Temma Berg and Jeanne Larsen (1989:xiii) explain when they assert that "the ability of feminist criticism to include contradictions without losing cohesiveness has been one of its greatest advantages". Felski (1991:23) also notes that a shift in emphasis has created a context in which

the multiple perspectives, plural meanings, and ironic ambiguity of experimental writing are linked to a notion of the feminine as

subversion, a transgressive force linked with the realm of the mother's body that continually threatens to disrupt the single fixed meanings of an authoritarian and repressive phallogocentric discourse.

"Materialist-feminist criticism" as proposed by Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (1985:xxi) sets an example of an inclusive feminist approach which focuses on culture as the determinative factor and thus implicitly acknowledges the validity of difference and accommodates the mutability of a socio-historical reality and its interaction with literature as a social/cultural construct. Newton and Rosenfelt (1985:xxvii) define materialist-feminist criticism by claiming that

a criticism combining feminist, socialist and anti-racist perspectives, is likely to assume that women are not universally the same, that their relations are also determined by race, class and sexual identification; that social change cannot be conceived of in terms only of women who are white and privileged; that integration into existing social structures is not likely to liberate even white middle-class women; and that unequal relations of power in general must be reconstructed, not only for women but for all the oppressed.

Apart from the social construction of gender, she then further emphasizes that a materialist-feminist criticism is also committed to other forms of power relations, such as class and race and sexual identity (Newton & Rosenfelt 1985:xix). In other words, a materialist-feminist criticism is opposed to the separation of theory and practice and would rather promote a dialectical relationship (Newton & Rosenfelt 1985:xxii), a "way of seeing that prompts us to locate in the same situation the forces of oppression and the seeds of resistance, to construct women in a given moment in history simultaneously as victims and as agents". It seems reminiscent of Patrick White's conception of sameness in difference in *Voss* (1983).

Teresa Ebert (1991:886) also proposes a "postmodern materialist feminist theory" but she distinguishes between ludic and resistance postmodernism (Ebert 1991:887) which seems to imply a separation of formal and political subversion, whereas my approach emphasizes the interaction between

form, subject and context and perhaps correlates best with Newton and Rosenfelt's approach. In particular, the emphasis falls on change/flux which implies a constant dialectic between society and its cultural constructs such as literature and the constant recognition of variables in interpretation. This concept is clearly illustrated in postmodernist writing, which informs the context of my interpretation.

As my perspective on feminism proposes that oppositional stances are exclusive and unproductive, I endorse the materialist-feminists' point of view that male identity is also subject to social construction and therefore ideologically inscribed (Newton & Rosenfelt 1985:xxiv). In fact, as I imply elsewhere, claiming exclusivity for female experience - or a polarization of male and female experience - obfuscates perspective and ignores the existence of difference and degrees of oppression, or as Newton and Rosenfelt (1985:xvii) explain:

Many feminists still identify an emphasis upon the universal and unchanging with 'patriarchy'. In so far, however, as our own constructions of history obscure historical change, cultural complexity and women's agency, they themselves replicate the habits of thought they intend to challenge. They produce, in fact, a feminist version of 'the' human condition.

Newton and Rosenfelt (1985:xxvi) propose that men should not only be viewed in terms of gender ideology but also in terms of class and race because these also imply internal divisions and power relations among men. So both women and men experience division and exploitation among themselves resulting in "a complex and contradictory web of relationships and loyalties". The implication is then that women are also responsible for perpetuating their traditional image or else they are merely inverting the power structures which they criticize. Materialist-feminism seems to present a solution to this dilemma by advocating collaboration instead of opposition to male interests, by acknowledging the complexity of gender relations as not just "a simple and unified patriarchy" (Newton & Rosenfelt 1985:xxix) but as a network of changing power relations.

In order to study these power relations in literature, it is necessary to take cognizance of the dynamic interaction between text and context and to acknowledge the constant dialectic between reality and fiction which aims to subvert the official history and to construct an alternative one to it.

1.4 Text and context: Fiction and history

Literature constitutes a form of cultural expression, a quest for self-definition and a means of coming to terms with reality (Gould 1981:11; González Echevarría 1990:45-46). The dynamic and complex nature of literature is circumscribed by Aralia López González (1988:45) as

esa expresión artística que tiene relación con todo que hace y vive el hombre, con todo lo que siente, percibe, piensa, padece y proyecta, nos permite conocernos, pues subyace en ella un sentido de pertenencia y una visión que da cuenta de nuestra situación en el mundo. Indagarla, analizarla, comunicarnos a través de ella, permite también definir nuestras vinculaciones y nuestras diferencias.³⁸

By nature, literature, or more specifically fiction, is inextricably related to and interactive with social and historical context. Therefore, as both González Echevarría (1990:ix) and Lejeune (1975:341) acknowledge, it does not function as a self-contained aesthetic product and it cannot be studied in isolation. In fact, Lejeune (1975:341) insists that "son indépendance n'est que très relative, et elle est d'abord un système social elle-même".³⁹

38 Translation: this artistic expression which relates to all that man does and experiences, to everything that he feels, perceives, thinks, suffers and projects, and allows us to know ourselves, for, underlying it, there is a sense of belonging and a vision which accounts for our situation in the world. To investigate it, analyse it, and communicate through it also allows us to define our connections and our differences.

39 Translation: Its independence is only relative as it is primarily a social system itself

As literature is dependent on context, and it is a personal interpretation of reality, it also incorporates a specific ideology⁴⁰ which could either complement and enrich the reader's world view or challenge his/her perception of history and reality. Margarita Fernández Olmo (1981:72) makes this point very clear when she asserts that the selection of material or experience depends on the ideological context of the author and that

La perspectiva y la actitud frente a esas experiencias y su fruto posterior, que es la obra en sí, no son nunca el producto de una dialéctica exclusivamente [sic]- interior, sino se desprenden del ser total del escritor, un ser en que la sociedad ha dejado, inevitablemente, su huella.⁴¹

Consequently, the specific context must serve as a guideline in the interpretation of a text. Haggis (1990:114) refers to the interaction between text and context and intertextual reference when she warns that to dissociate a subject from its origin is to fall into the trap of a biased perspective. She explains:

In a first step out from under the exclusionary biases which form part and parcel of our intellectual framework in Western social science, we must address the fact that a focus on any subject must inevitably involve the portrayal of others; and that these others are important dimensions of our subject.

40 I have used the term ideology here in accordance with the definition given by Newton & Rosenfelt (1985:xix):

Ideology, then, is not a set of deliberate distortions imposed on us from above, but a complex and contradictory system of representations (discourse, images, myths) through which we experience ourselves in relation to each other and to the social structures in which we live. Ideology is a system of representations through which we experience ourselves.

41 Translation: The perspective and attitude towards these experiences and the resultant product, which is the work as such, are never the product of an exclusive interior dialectic but emanate from the total being of the writer, a being on which society has inevitably left its traces.

Historical context also shapes an individual, and community plays an important part in both the reconstruction of experience and its interpretation and in the eventual perspective gained. The Personal Narratives Group (1989:19) stress this fact when they maintain that

Context is not a script. Rather it is a dynamic process, through which the individual simultaneously shapes and is shaped by her environment. Similarly, an analysis of context, which emphasizes these dynamic processes, is an interpretive strategy which is both diacronic and synchronic.

This sub-chapter will then be devoted to sketching the socio-historical context of Latin American and South African literature; the evolution of the novel in these regions and its interaction with socio-historical conditions; the restrictive influence of the male-dominated literary canon on women's literature as well as their reaction to literary marginalization and absence from history.

The development of literature in both Latin America and South Africa is closely associated with indigenous myth, historical events and the natural environment. Several of the early literary sources in Latin America were "historical chronicles, letters, testaments, rhymes and ballads of the discovery and conquest" (Vargas Llosa 1987:3) which had been compiled and recorded by various members of the clergy and explorers. This was also the case in South Africa, where the works of missionaries and journals written by explorers also constituted the first literary works. González Echevarría (1990:45-46) stresses the significance of such early literature when he explains that

To write was a form of enfranchisement, of legitimation. The **picaro**, the chronicler, and in a sense the whole New World, seek enfranchisement and validation of their existence through the writing of their stories.

Although the early historical chronicles and political essays provided an important source for the emergence of the socially-oriented novel, the

impact of vast unexplored territories, exposure to natural forces and cultural isolation also shaped the lives and literature of the colonialists. Jean Franco (1973:37) clearly describes the plight of the Argentinean writers, which would have been equally applicable to other territories on this vast continent:

[they] felt themselves lost in the geographical space of the land around, lost among alien peoples - alien gauchos, wild Indians, or coastal negroes and mulattos, lost in a cultural vacuum, faced with the prospect of creating a culture.

Consequently, their literature assumed the character of an exploration of the environment as a metaphor for identity, evoking a dialectic between civilization and nature - and later more specifically between the city and the country as contrasting spheres of experience. In accordance with the settlers' struggle for survival and economic independence from the "home" country, which was Spain, it seems natural that the two most prominent themes which have emerged from the early literature right up to the nineteenth century, would be those of conquest and independence (Balderston 1986:9).

These themes perhaps underlie most colonial literatures because they also reflect the inherent tension between the individual, society and natural environment/reality, which is constantly explored in the trajectory of the novel - especially in Western literature. As Gould (1981:137) states, the novel "always implies some set of assumptions about the nature of the divided self in society and about the problems of its discourse".

The inherent social tension was exacerbated by the imposition of colonial/imperialist rule in the colonies of the New World and finally erupted into reaction against cultural domination and political oppression generating a consciousness of, and an urge to reclaim individual and group identity as the only means to combat colonization.

The first novel to emerge in Latin America, called *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816) by Fernández de Lizardi, was written in the picaresque tradition as

an inducement to social reform. It was followed by various other socially-oriented novels in an attempt to address different cultural aspects as well as political and social problems.

In Latin America the period of **modernismo** (1898) associated with artistic innovation was followed by **postmodernismo** (about 1920 onwards) which was characterized by a combination of impressionism and realism (Stimson & Navas-Ruiz 1975:8) and found expression in works on society and nature. Apart from the revolutionary themes novels were also published which reflected the different cultural aspects of Latin American society, in particular, the "novela criolla" which addressed the position of Latin Americans of Spanish descent; the novels on "regionalismo" or "costumbrismo" depicted regional customs and the "indiginista and indianista" focused on the indigenous cultures; the "gauchesca" recounted the life of isolation and hardship on the prairies and ranches and the "suprarealista" which successfully evolved into magic realism assimilating the various trends of realism and myth prevalent in the Latin American literature - for example, Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* [*One hundred years of solitude*].

During the 1960s Latin American literature experienced a "boom" period largely due to new innovative techniques such as magic realism and the expansion of Anglo-American and European readership horizons through the translations of hitherto unread texts because they had been written in Spanish. This period proves to be the beginning of a political awareness and more intense exploration of Latin American literature featuring names such as Cortázar and Carpentier. As Labanyi (1989:27) notes, the "boom" writers found the "marriage of political radicalism with the demand for a return to roots, whether in the form of nature or human nature" to be particularly appealing.

In reaction to political oppression and the concomitant censorship, the novelists were challenged to develop new techniques to convey their message. Consequently, artistic accomplishment - a conscious awareness of the creative process - assumed significance in the interpretation of social themes in the 1970s. Celia Correás de Zapata and Johnson (1980:11-12)

give Borges's innovative and free spirit due recognition as "el paladín de la fantasía liberada"⁴² but it was Julio Cortázar who put the nature and emphasis of artistic creation to the test in his novel *Rayuela* (Franco 1973:274).

In the 80s and 90s modes such as allegory and the picaresque seem to have assumed new dimensions of meaning within the contemporary context, creating a necessary distance for perspective. However, the most famous innovative strategy to emerge from Latin American literature is probably magic realism. It is a mode which has successfully accommodated two different concepts of reality as complementary facets of experience: one western and one indigenous (pre-Colombian) or, one First World and one Third World. It indicates a new way of looking at experience as, for example, can be perceived in the works of García Márquez and Isabel Allende. Magic realism is then a manifestation of the co-existence of two cultural paradigms which are more pronounced in literature, philosophy and art than in real life. Consequently, this duality between European and indigenous culture and the attempt to interpret such a reality is regarded by Yurkievich (1986:8) as one of the unique constituents of Latin American literature.

With regard to English South African literature, Rich (1984:122) observes that realism is not the apposite term to apply to English literature in South Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, because themes of exploration and pastoral romance prevailed until the middle of the twentieth century. Most of the English novels dealt with the exploration of geographical space and travel and the difficulty of the adaptation to a hostile environment - here writers like Rider Haggard and Lourens van der Post come to mind. However, influenced by the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, political oppression became an important theme which Paton already addressed in the 1950s in *Cry the beloved country* - although Rich (1984:130) contends that the basic form of the text still owes much to romance. Realism then only became relevant during the 1960s when South African authors such as André Brink, Etienne le Roux - members of the

42 Translation: the champion of liberated fantasy.

"sestigerbeweging", an articulate group of writers within the Afrikaans literary establishment who wrote in reaction to the current political and social system which held sway in the 1960s - and Nadine Gordimer wrote critically about the inhumanity of the political system and incurred censorship for their pains. Due to the harsh implementation of the policy of Apartheid, blacks were unable to express their grievances in writing and were forced to find asylum elsewhere. Those who defied the censorship bans were exiled and alienated from their cultures. In South Africa, novels cutting too close to the bone of Apartheid were banned: for instance, the black author Ezekiel Mphahlele's book called *Down Second Avenue*; the Afrikaans author André Brink's book entitled *Kennis van die aand* and some of Nadine Gordimer's novels as well as many other black and reactionary authors suffered the same fate. Some of the black authors, among them Lewis Nkosi and Ezekiel Mphahlele went into voluntary exile while others were forced to leave (Gordimer 1970:51). In Latin America several authors, among them Isabel Allende, were also forced to leave their countries because their political beliefs clashed with those enforced by authoritarian regimes.

However, during the last twenty years the externalized exploration of society and environment has assumed a new internalized dimension where the psychological effects of oppression are investigated by authors such as J.M. Coetzee and Sheila Fugard⁴³ who have taken recourse to literary modes such as allegory and fabulation to interpret the complexity of reality. It would appear though, that innovative strategies have not been appreciated within the South African political context and an author such as J.M. Coetzee has been criticized for his apparent disregard of the South African political reality. This "limiting conception" (Liscano 1987:56) depending on realism as the norm is also evident in Latin American literature and can be ascribed to an adherence to committed literature at the exclusion of any aesthetic value.⁴⁴ Yet, I do not agree with Liscano

43 For example Coetzee's *Waiting for the barbarians* and Sheila Fugard's *The castaways*. Gordimer's *A sport of nature* can be mentioned here as an example of the picaresque.

44 Crehan (1993:3) addresses this problem from an interpretive perspective, and points out that by imposing a specific context on a text, ideology is inevitably

(1987:56) about Latin American literature because despite their political intent, Latin American authors such as Isabel Allende and Poniatowska have managed to successfully combine the political with magic realism, or fantasy.

Interestingly, manifestations of magic realism have emerged in several novels by Afrikaans authors, among others, Fransi Philips and Wilma Stockenström but has not had much impact on the English novel scene.⁴⁵ I would suggest that this phenomenon could be associated with the land and its peoples. Perhaps the Afrikaner was forced to adopt Africa as home and thereby came closer to understand the indigenous mysticism of Africa, whereas the English author still seemed to maintain an aloofness because he associated home with England. This would explain the recourse of Afrikaans women writers to a kind of magic realism such as evoked in Latin American literature. Coetzee (1983:79) seems to endorse such a supposition when he points out that the English language has a "most uneasy relationship with the natural world of Southern Africa, whose parts it has never so much as succeeded in naming". Consequently, English often has to rely on Afrikaans terminology to designate or describe parts of the South African landscape.⁴⁶

It must be mentioned here that an important point of difference between African and European literature and culture is situated in their respective perceptions of the individual. Whereas the identity of the individual is defined within the boundaries of his/her community in African culture and

implied. As no general context is possible, the assumed one would be prescriptive and therefore counterproductive; denying the reader free access and interaction with the text. As Crehan states: "This need for context has its own context". It is to this "imposed" context that J.M. Coetzee reacts. He insists that the aesthetic value of the text is of primary importance and refuses to be coerced by political realities into compromising his artistic integrity.

45 Gordimer (1984:230) admits, in an interview with Marilyn Powell in 1984, that allegory is more effective than realistic fiction but she rejects it because it is too sophisticated to reach a large section of the population. Gardner (1993:9) seems to share her feeling that the South African writer ought not to write for the elite.

46 This is very noticeable in the works of Herman Charles Bosman, a well known South African author writing in English.

literature, the individual is revered for his/her originality and unique qualities in European culture and literature. This implies a social-oriented world view in opposition to the individual-centred Western perspective. Latin-American cultures are strongly community-oriented as their return to the roots and the myths of their past indicate in their literature.

This polarisation in perspective constitutes one of the main differences between Afro- and Euro-centric literature and complicates the dialectic between individual and society explored in the postcolonial novel. Perspective and context therefore assume a significant role in multicultural interpretation as White and Couzens (1984:4) indicate:

Only by placing himself as author accurately in relation to his material can the post-colonial writer convince the reader that his vision is complete and that he is not taking the virtues of his western education (or his European publisher) for granted

It seems ironical that the individual's dependence on society for the realization of his identity in Western literature is clearly illustrated in a variety of novels - especially those situated in erstwhile colonial settings - which explore the effects of social deprivation on the individual and illustrate that physical isolation acts as a metaphor for mental isolation and subsequent alienation. This is evident in texts as disparate as André Brink's *An instant in the wind*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of darkness*, Bessie Head's *A question of power*, Patrick White's *Voss* and perhaps even in a modified way in Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* [*The lost steps*] and José Donoso's *Casa de campo*. They express the constant dialectic between individual aspiration and social norms which Ainsa (1986:14) interprets as "ser" and "deber ser" - what one is and what one ought to be or, it can be interpreted as reality and the ideal.

It is exactly this facet of experience that women's literature addresses because, as a marginalized group, women realize that social interaction is unavoidable/inescapable for existence. As the Personal Narratives Group (1989:19) stress, "the individual is joined to the world through social groups, structural relations, and identities". Annis Pratt (1981:6) points

out that the characteristic tension between the individual and society in the novel is exacerbated in women's literature because a woman's position becomes untenable when she has to assert both her individualism and rights as a woman within society:

Women's fiction reflects an experience radically different from men's because our drive towards growth as persons is thwarted by our society's prescriptions concerning gender.

Due to women's long absence from history and their scant representation in literature during the colonial period (Johnson 1983:157), men have dominated the cultural scene and have established a canon of accredited texts which have determined the trends and themes in literature. As the literary canon is male-dominated, the roles ascribed to women usually conform to stereotypes which define women in terms of their relationships to men (Johnson 1983:185). Several critics (Ferguson 1977; Johnson 1983; Pratt 1981) scrutinize literary "evidence" to observe how literary images of women can contribute "information concerning their role in history and their participation in the development of the arts" (Johnson 1983:3). For instance, Nancy Leigh (1985) gives an interesting analysis of the victimization of women in Jean Rhys's fiction, illustrating how they tend to conform to or internalize the expected image of women harboured by a masculine society.

Masiello (1992:54) maintains that the necessity to discover common issues has prompted women to enter into dialogue - mainly with each other. This need would probably account for the journalistic enterprise of so many Latin American women authors in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Victoria Ocampo, Elena Poniatowska, Isabel Allende. It must be acknowledged that women's journalism has contributed to an "awareness of the social and historical context of women's roles and women's writing" (Women, culture and politics, 1990:9).

The novel then provided a means of exploring women's experience, their limitations and possibilities, especially as far as characterization and plot

were concerned. Nancy Walker (1990:18) comments on the novel's therapeutic value when she states:

like consciousness-raising groups, a central goal of which was to help women see the connection between the personal and the political, the contemporary novel by women has become a forum for issues of deep relevance to women's lives.

One of the most important missions of women writers has been to express their individual and social identity through writing and thus assert themselves while subtly subverting male preconceptions and the male-established literary canon. Humm (1986:3) notes how this strategy substantiates the existence of feminist criticism when she states that "women become feminists by becoming conscious of, and criticising, the power of symbols and the ideology of culture". In their attempt to reinterpret history and women's place in it, they are often forced to attack traditional myths, stereotypes and institutions of (patriarchal) power.⁴⁷

Marjorie Agosín (1986:7) describes the significance of women's writing through the metaphors of silence and imagination: silence emphasizes the cultural isolation of women⁴⁸ and it also evokes the silent yet effective power of literature, while imagination recalls its subversive potential. Agosín (1986:8) affirms the right of women to self-expression and to bear testimony, or as she (Agosín 1986:11) asserts: "Escribo no para justificar que hemos escrito sino para indicar qué bien hemos escrito y sobrevivido a las garras de la indiferencia y del olvido".⁴⁹

47 Santucci (1988:2) remarks that the protagonists are juxtaposed with female stereotypes "who serve as a gauge by which the reader may measure the social position and stance of the central character".

48 Agosín (1986:11) elucidates this concept as "jamás haber sido incluida como integrante de una colectividad solidaria" [they have never been included as an integral part of a collective unity].

49 Translation: I write not to justify that we have written but to indicate how well we have written and survived the clutches of indifference and forgetfulness.

In her work, *How to suppress women's writing*, Joanna Russ (1983) investigates reasons for women's exclusion from the literary canon despite their prolific contribution to literature and the value of their experience. She identifies the main reasons as: poverty and the concomitant lack of education and leisure - for the worker classes; a lack of encouragement and dismissive attitudes and the distortion or concealment of facts. Marjorie Agosin (1986:7) argues in more or less the same vein as far as Latin American women are concerned.

Women's liberation should then be accomplished in all spheres of life and should therefore also extend to literature. Fernández Olmo (1981:69) insists that especially the formal configuration of literature needs to be addressed and re-evaluated:

hay que revalorar las convenciones literarias, recuperar y revitalizar los géneros, ensayar nuevas formas de análisis crítico y reconocer las posibilidades liberalizadores de la literatura.

.....

El sexismo en la literatura no sólo se revela en los prejuicios de autores y de críticos en cuanto a contenido se refiere, sino también en las convenciones literarias que influyen el desarrollo de los géneros, las cuales configuran la creación literaria y nuestras actitudes hacia ella.⁵⁰

This assertion implies that women should utilize all the opportunities at their disposal to assert equality. They need to become familiar with the terrain of literary criticism, or as Humm (1986:5) puts it, "to appropriate the land and the weapons" and to redefine and re-evaluate the contributions of women which have become subsumed in male writing. Humm (1986:6-8) identifies three traditional misconceptions that feminist criticism

50 Translation: we have to re-evaluate literary conventions, recover and revitalize genres, attempt new forms of critical analysis and recognize the liberating possibilities of literature ...

Sexism in literature is not only exposed through the prejudice of authors and critics with regard to the content referred to, but also in the literary conventions which influence the evolution of genres which signify literary creation and our attitude towards it.

attempts to expose: the misrepresentation of the image of women in history; the prescriptive norms or "sex-related writing strategies" imposed on women, and finally the way in which "the continuing tradition of literary culture, like the economic and social traditions of which it is a part, uses male norms to exclude or undervalue female writing and scholarship".

Paula Backscheider (1987:259) also intimates various avenues of exploration that exist for women to undermine the canon when she observes that

the chains of identity may never lose their power, but Austen - and hundreds of other women writers - learned to make the chains themselves speak. Ironically, the heroines are like their creators: resourceful, ingenious, resilient, and tough. Women writers and their characters seek respect and fulfilment. Increasingly, women writers expanded women's options even as they began to experiment with the novel's range. And most of them remained true to themselves as they lived out the truth that adaptation is strength and survival.

This observation correlates with Rachel Blau DuPlessis's (1985) contention that women have transcended conventional closure by transforming their former weakness into strength and "writing beyond the ending" . Women have then learnt to manipulate literary convention and reading strategies to suit their own purposes.

2 DEFINING THE PARADIGM

2.1 Literary modes: Reading strategy and subversion

The main objective in this chapter will be to illustrate the seminal position of genres/modes¹ in both the articulation and interpretation of literary texts.

Genres/modes are vital codes interacting with historical and literary contexts in a system of communication. Although mode as a literary convention presupposes a specific frame of reference, it must not be regarded as a "mere curb on expression" (Fowler 1985:20) in the traditional sense, but as an additional way of expressing meaning. In fact, Fowler (1985:20) contends that "it makes the expressiveness of literary works possible" and furthermore, argues that "while literature may move away from the old genres, it cannot move away from genre altogether without ceasing to be literature" (Fowler 1985:278).

In order to avoid the interpretation of genre/mode as normative, and to indicate the mutability of literary modes, The Personal Narratives Group (1989:99) choose to use the designation *narrative form* - instead of mode - which they describe as follows:

To interpret narrative form, then, means attending to cultural models, power relations, and individual imagination. All are brought to bear on the act of self-interpretation articulated in the choice of the narrative form (Personal Narratives Group 1989:102).

Consequently, genres/modes always play a role in the composition and interpretation of a text, whether consciously or subconsciously (Fowler

1 Although Fowler (1985) mainly refers to the characteristics of genres, modes share similar characteristics of communication, mutability and interaction with context. I shall therefore use the term **mode** where he might have used **genre** because this study explores the nuanced variation of modes within an autobiographical paradigm. Within this context, autobiography would perhaps best qualify as a genre.

1985:22). Fowler (1985:23) is quite explicit about this fact when he states that

Writers and readers of certain historical periods, for example, have ignored genre. But while doing so, they have unconsciously engaged in generic transactions all the same. In fact, ignoring genre has often meant passively accepting the conventions prescribed by custom or fashion.

An awareness of mode is therefore a prerequisite for any interpretation. In fact, Fowler (1985:259) warns that adverse criticism can often be ascribed to misinterpretations based on ignorance or a bland disregard of modes or conventional signs. Corti (1978:120) refers to the thematic and formal interdependence of genres which gives rise to codification and asserts that violation of this codification is just as important as adherence to it because it implies a certain interpretation (Corti 1978:122-123) which could be overlooked if the initial genre/mode were to be misinterpreted.

Although Fowler (1985:259) concedes that the recognition of modes is an arbitrary procedure dependent on many factors such as the function and visibility or perceptibility of modes in a text as well as the reader's literary horizon, he insists that "the processes of generic recognition are in fact fundamental to the reading process". Corti (1978:42) also draws attention to the role of the reader when she proposes that he/she can either approach the text as a closed entity or act as a co-producer.

A plurality of critical perspectives can contribute to a comprehensive and meaningful interpretation and Fowler (1985:257) seems to endorse such an approach when he states:

Usually a reader only shares enough conventions with the writer to construct in part. Nevertheless, scholars and critics can do much to recover the original features more fully by cooperative effort.

Conceding that misinterpretation can easily occur, Fowler also suggests that multiple perspective can adjust possible misconstruction and he

(Fowler 1985:260) reminds us that "innovative works tend to be obscure precisely because their generic context is not yet obvious".

Janet Varner Gunn (1982:21) also stresses the recognition of genre/mode as an important indicator in the reading² process when she claims that

Genre, I am arguing, is first of all an instrument of reading, not primarily a formula for writing. As such, genre is what enables the reader to locate himself or herself before the text and thereby to have access to the possible meaning of the text

.....

Further, I use the term *reader* to identify a position, not a person. The agent one normally regards as the writer can also occupy the position of the reader, as I want to demonstrate when I use Proust's "Marcel" to illustrate the autobiographical response in Chapter 4.

The identification of genre is retroactive (Fowler 1985:50) because it is through reference to the original works and in comparison with previous works, that similarities often become clear. This fact is illustrated by the classification of *Lazarillo de Tormes* as a picaresque novel only after the publication of *Guzmán de Alfarache* which was published about forty years later. Therefore, in interpretation, reference to the original generic state is as crucial as taking into account the influence of the critic's own time/context (Fowler 1985:51). Corti (1978:144) explains how modes adapt to historical context when she says that

every era produces its own type of signedness, which is made manifest in social and literary models. As soon as these models are consumed and reality seems to vanish, new signs become needed to recapture reality, and this allows us to assign an information-value to the dynamic structures of literature. So seen, literature is both the condition and the place of artistic communication between senders and addressees, or public.

2 I would be disinclined to agree with her claim that reading supersedes formulation because the author's intention still determines the operative convention.

Thus, one of the salient features of modes is their mutability which allows for countless innovations or variations, and enables them to resist specific definition. Fowler (1985:24) also draws attention to the dynamics of this process when he stresses the adaptability of modes, their protean quality:

But, as we have seen, genres are actually in a continual state of transmutation. It is by their modification, primarily, that individual works convey literary meaning. Frequent adjustments in genre theory are needed, therefore, if the forms are to continue to mediate between the flux of history and the canons of art.

Because the mutability of genres/modes is also specifically dependent on their interaction with the social context as various critics (Corti 1978:118; Neumann 1989:27 and Newton 1985:xxvi) emphasize, it prevents the imposition of a specific definition on a mode/genre. Consequently, I shall only be able to delineate general features which have guided me in the identification of the specific modes discussed in this thesis. My caution in this respect is all the more pertinent when I consider Lejeune's (1975:311)³ warning that

Les genres littéraires ne sont pas des êtres en soi: ils constituent, à chaque époque, une sorte de code implicite à travers lequel, et grâce auquel, les oeuvres du passé et les oeuvres nouvelles peuvent être reçues et classées par les lecteurs. C'est par rapport à des modèles, à des "horizons d'attente", à toute une géographie variable, que les textes littéraires sont *produits* puis *reçus*, qu'ils satisfassent cette attente ou qu'ils la transgressent et la forcent à ce renouveler.⁴

3 Although Lejeune proposes a definition for autobiography, he remains cautious of imposing an inflexible paradigm.

4 Translation: Literary genres are not self-sufficient/independent: they constitute, in each epoch, a kind of implicit code according to which, and thanks to which, the works from the past and the present can be accommodated and classified by readers. It is through contact with these models, the horizons of expectancy, the changing geography, that literary texts are produced and then accepted, that they satisfy that expectancy by transgressing it and enforcing its renewal.

Genre is then not only significant within a literary context, but it acquires additional meaning when studied within a social context in order to shed "new light on the history of the reception of texts in varied sociocultural contexts and movements" (Corti 1978:119). White and Couzens (1984:18) also underline the dialectic between history and fiction, for

literary works are seen as responding to historical change rather than being regarded as a set of discrete capsules subject only to their own internal, timeless laws. The criticism of literature, in short, has everything to do with the criticism of society.

Although it is therefore essential to recognize and acknowledge the influential role of modes in any interpretation, the reader/interpreter also has to take his own ideology into account when reading a text. Julia Swindells (1989) illustrates how an interpretation can be unconsciously imposed on a text when she discusses the *Diaries of Hannah Cullwick* and exposes a hidden agenda of feminist oppression. Apart from ideological influences, the reader could also be susceptible to the influence of the literary canon. Fowler (1985:216) draws particular attention to the role of the literary canon which is an ideological construction dependent on social context, when he cautions that

the force of the literary canon would be hard to exaggerate. Apart from its obvious effects of exclusion and limitation, it has a vital positive influence by virtue of its variety and proportions.

.....

Of the many factors determining canon, genre is surely among the most decisive.

Thus interpretation must acknowledge literary convention and ideological subtext or, as The Personal Narratives Group express it:

Obviously, the richest contextualization would seek to understand all the relevant parameters of a life. But the very act of interpretation requires us to choose among the multiple identities and associations shaping a life. Furthermore, addressing context involves understanding the meaning of a life in its narrator's frame of

reference, and making sense of that life from the different and necessarily comparative frame of reference of the interpreter.

The reader can therefore approach the text from different angles, either as a closed entity or act as co-producer as Corti (1978:42) points out.

It is within this context that women's autobiographical literature and strategies of subversion will be discussed. First and foremost, it must be recognized that women's literature faces a formidable opponent in the male literary canon and consequently, their main aim is directed towards the achievement of social, political and literary equality. To attain this end, they employ strategies of subversion, in the form of modal manipulation. Thus, failure to acknowledge this feminist-oriented intentionality - whether conscious or unconscious - and the mutable character of modes could lead to misinterpretation and adverse criticism.

Certain kinds of women's literature therefore have a recognisable political function, as Cranny-Francis (1990:3) points out when she observes that both socialists and women activists in the nineteenth century availed themselves of texts for subversive purposes. The main difference in contemporary literature resides in the fact that the subversion is more subtle as it is not only limited to plot but includes the convention/mode itself.⁵ Cranny-Francis (1990:9) is very clear on this point:

For contemporary feminists, however, use of generic fiction must be tempered by a complex understanding of the ideological significance of textual practices, the practices and conventions which define and characterize those texts for readers. These practices, these conventions, are not neutral. They carry or encode the ideological function of the text at least as much as does the story.

She (Cranny-Francis 1990:1) discusses the "feminist appropriation of the generic 'popular' literary forms" as subversive strategy and she mentions

5 In her account of activists on abortion, Faye Ginsburg (1989: 60) makes an interesting distinction between **life stories** as opposed to **life histories** because she is interested in the "narrative devices used by activists to frame their lives". This not only clearly illustrates the correlation between history and fiction, but emphasizes the significance of narrative devices in the process of interpretation.

various modes such as fantasy and romance but she does not identify the picaresque. However, in my opinion it coincides with her description on "genre fiction" and serves as an excellent example of a fictional strategy of assertion and subversion which she describes as follows:

This is genre fiction written from a self-consciously feminist perspective, consciously encoding an ideology which is in direct opposition to the dominant gender ideology of Western society, patriarchal ideology.

Addressing the question of interpretation, Debra Castillo (1992:5) refers to Marta Traba's (1985:26) contention that women's/feminist texts are pervasively misread by "applying a specific set of inappropriate cultural, ideologic, and aesthetic assumptions to a different group of texts as if they were universal values". Following up on this statement, Castillo (1992:5-6) asks the seminal question which underlines the need for an appropriate reading strategy to analyse women's writing:

If women do not write works that, according to these traditional values, are recognizably innovative, what are they doing instead? Is there another set of strategies that can more accurately understand the kinds of underrecognized innovations in these texts by women? Under what conditions and with what limitations can the discerning reader identify and evaluate such discursive practices?

Because ideologies are dominant in the interpretation of contemporary literature, they have to be recognized as such and therefore a basic/singular approach such as feminism should not represent the only angle of interpretation. It would always imply a danger of bias and a disregard for social complexity. Haggis (1990:115) also expresses strong misgivings about a purely woman-centered analysis and she warns:

A woman-centered approach is thus interpreted as replacing the singular, presumed universal, view of European men, with an opposite: the singular, encompassing view of European women. The continuance of such a dichotomy effectively colonises gender for

white women and men rather than introducing gender as a relational dimension of colonialism.

Although my analysis, structured along the lines of a socio-literary investigation, will use a feminist-oriented point of departure, I shall not only rely on a feminist approach but will focus on the interaction of different dimensions of experience and their meaning within a specific context. As Breen (1990:xi) points out, context is a decisive factor in the interpretation of a text with a variable "scale of values" (Breen 1990:xii) and an open-minded approach:

Within any work of fiction, the skilled reader can discern a central voice - not necessarily that of the narrator, nor even the actual author - which reflects a construction of the distinctive point of view of the world in that work of fiction. The reader can then 'deconstruct' the given fiction by identifying gaps, contradictions and blind spots as well as novelty, revelation and seditious departures in the world-view of each work.

Perspective then becomes an important consideration and a critic like Humm for instance, does not necessarily subscribe to male exclusion or an inversion of power. She (Humm 1986:9) suggests that "alternatives to tradition can be proposed" so that "male critical concepts" can "be situated within a larger textual system". However, if men fail to perceive their own readings as prejudiced and distorted, women cannot insist on correctives. Therefore the appropriate reading strategy is crucial and Humm (1986:13) points out that for women readers

gendered reading is both essentially different *and* one produced by our agreeing to read 'difference' as a crucial paradigm of cultural construction. The *extent* of difference is therefore infinite. It is in a syntax of insubordination and subversion. It is in the whole difficulty for women of engaging with the materials of language itself as a signifying practice.

Castillo (1992:4), mindful of the third-world paradigm imposed on Latin American literature by European critics, suggests that a text should be approached with the context and modes of discourse in mind and she claims that "the careful critic will take ... only what is useful and pertinent and stir that material together with other critical/theoretical approaches that complement it".

2.2 Autobiography and women's writing

Autobiographical texts describing the life history of a historical person as a social document will only serve as a point of reference in this discussion of **autobiographical writing**. Due to the inclusive nature of contemporary autobiography, I have chosen to use the designation **autobiographical writing** (used by Musarra-Schroeder 1989) because autobiography as such can no longer be reconciled with the traditional concept of the term. As Jongeneel (1989:7) points out, "ontwikkelingen in het mensbeeld hebben de geschiedenis van de autobiografie ingrijpend beïnvloed, en omgekeerd".⁶

The main emphasis will fall on the fictional reconstructions or interpretations of autobiographies and biographies and their symbiotic relationship, or significant interrelationship with modes such as the picaresque. Although personal accounts such as memoirs, journals, diaries and letters are also regarded as autobiographical writing (Weintraub 1989:11), and are also popular in contemporary women's literature, they will not feature prominently in this thesis due to their limited scope. As the particular emphasis falls on retrospective interpretation, letters and journals which are time-bound need to be interpreted by the reader in retrospect, while the narrator in the autobiography already partly fulfils this interpretive role.

The term *autobiography* is relatively new. It only originated as a concept in the eighteenth century due to various cultural and historical influences. Similar to the picaresque, the term as such was formulated in retrospect,

6 Translation: developments concerning the human image have had a drastic effect on the history of autobiography, and *vice versa*.

after several works had justified its designation as a genre (Neumann 1989:27).

Among the various attempts to define autobiography, the best known in this field would probably be that of Philippe Lejeune, who has managed to condense various perspectives into a paradigm generally accepted as the traditional form of autobiography. He is careful, however, not to impose a rigid definition on the genre because he realises the difficulty of capturing the elusive nature of genre/mode which responds to and interacts with an ever-changing cultural context. Consequently, Lejeune (1975:8) warns that

pour étudier un genre, il faut lutter contre l'illusion de la permanence, contre la tentation normative, et contre les dangers de l'idéalisation: à vrai dire, il n'est peut-être pas possible d'étudier *un* genre, à moins d'accepter d'en sortir.⁷

He (Lejeune 1975:14) formulates his concept of autobiography as follows:

Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité.⁸

The words "histoire de sa personnalité" indicate the interpretation of his development as a person and not merely an account of the events in his life. For Lejeune (1975:27), the main guideline for traditional autobiography is situated in the "pacte" which demands that the author, narrator and character should all have the same identity. If any of these

7 Translation: In studying a genre, the illusion of permanence, the temptation of setting norms and the danger of idealization must be opposed/avoided; to be quite honest, it might not be possible to study a genre, but rather to accept it as such from a distance.

8 Translation (Olney 1980:18): A retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality.

three prerequisites are absent, the text does not conform to the requirements of an autobiography.

The relationship between the author, narrator and protagonist also determines the main difference between autobiography and biography. In biography, the identities of the author and the protagonist are different, while in autobiography the author, narrator and character have the same identity (Lejeune 1975:27). However, apart from this fact, the two modes have much in common as far as content and approach are concerned. Lejeune (1975:38) distinguishes biography from autobiography by pointing out the difference in focus between resemblance and identity:

dans la biographie, c'est la ressemblance qui doit fonder l'identité, dans l'autobiographie, c'est l'identité qui fonde la ressemblance. L'identité est le point de départ réel de l'autobiographie; la ressemblance, l'impossible horizon de la biographie. La fonction différente de la ressemblance dans les deux systèmes s'explique par là.⁹

Biography will be relevant to the analysis of testimonial literature in this study.

Autobiography has proven to be a popular genre in contemporary literary fiction and a significant number of autobiographical texts and articles have swamped the literary scene since the 1950s which Olney (1980:11-12) ascribes to the emphasis on self-scrutiny in contemporary literature.¹⁰ He (1980:13-14) defines the nature of autobiography and its place in contemporary literature in the following terms:

I would suggest that this special quality of autobiography - that is, that autobiography renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the

9 Translation: in the biography it is the resemblance which creates identity, in the autobiography, it is the identity which creates the resemblance. Identity is the real point of departure in autobiography, resemblance is the impossible horizon of the biography.

10 Especially since the 1960s, critics such as, Lejeune, Neumann, Olney and Weintraub, have distinguished themselves as experts in this field.

experience and the vision of a people, which is the same experience and the same vision lying behind and informing all the literature of that people - is one of the reasons why autobiography has lately become such a popular, even fashionable, study in the academic world where traditional ways of organizing literature by period or school have tended to give way to a different sort of organization (or disorganization). This new academic dispensation brings together a literature that is very rich and highly various, heterogeneous in its composition - a literature so diverse that it cries out for some defining center; such a center autobiography has been felt to provide.

Traditional autobiography distinguished itself from other literature by its documentary style and chronological accounts of the lives of saints or statesmen.¹¹ However, within the postmodernist paradigm, the traditional definition has lost its distinctive character as a "non-literary" genre and renewed interest in the individual and his/her place in society has once again highlighted autobiographical writing as an appropriate means of self-expression. Consequently, the emphasis placed on the life and the past of the author/protagonist in traditional autobiography has shifted to concentrate on the individual and his/her focus on the present in contemporary autobiography.¹² The events are recounted in terms of their influence on the narrator's life - the psychological impact - while in other forms of autobiographical writing the outside events form the focus of the account. In brief, time is superseded by space and the chronological character of autobiography becomes less conspicuous and in some cases obsolete. A good example of the adaptation to the contemporary exigencies of women's literature would be Mireya Robles's text entitled

11 The first autobiographies were usually written by important personages in society, whose lives served as examples of spiritual or social achievement, usually in the church or the state. Among these, St Augustin and Jean Jacques Rousseau were the most famous. Hagiographies, relating to the lives of saints also conform to autobiographical writing and would be classified as biographies.

12 Olney (1980:87) perceives a shift in focus from *bios* to *autos* and Neumann (1989:30) claims that historical context in traditional autobiography was stressed at the cost of psychological development.

Hagiografía de Narcisa la bella. Here hagiography becomes transformed by magic realism and assumes an ironic tone by illustrating women's oppression within the family and society.

From a synthesis of critical perspectives, several features of contemporary autobiographical writing have evolved: difference, duality of perspective and reader strategy.¹³ Firstly, the acknowledgement of individuality or difference which, as Weintraub (1989:24) notes, found expression in "de bewuste cultivering van het verschil".¹⁴ He (Weintraub 1989:10) also emphasizes the cultural influence and historical frame of reference when he claims that "de autobiografie als een wijze van zelfherkenning onze aandacht vestigt op een bij uitstek historische wijze van bewustwording"¹⁵ and he (Weintraub 1989:20) therefore perceives autobiography as a form of self-consciousness which echoes Olney's (1980:4) opinion that autobiography is "the most rarified and self-conscious of literary performances".

Secondly, and linking up with the first, is the concept of self-scrutiny and the concomitant act of interpreting a life.¹⁶ By stressing self-reflection, Neumann (1989:38) is also describing a process of reconstruction or fictionalization:

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- 13 These aspects are also identified by Gunn (1982:12-13) from a slightly different angle so that her "impulse" would relate to self-definition, the "perspective" to the retrospective stance and the "response" to the reader. She (Gunn 1982:12-13) explains this as follows:

The *impulse* arises out of the effort to confront the problem of temporality and can be assumed operative in any attempt to make sense of experience. The *perspective* shapes autobiographical impulse by bringing it to language and displaying it as narrative surface; it is informed by problems of locating gaining access to the past. The *response* has to do with the problem of appropriation and the reader's relation to the autobiographical text.

- 14 Translation: The conscious cultivation of difference.
- 15 Translation: As a means of self-knowledge, the autobiography focuses our attention on a particularly historic dimension of consciousness.
- 16 Both Neumann (1989:27) and Weintraub (1989:13) regard autobiography in this light.

Iedere autobiograaf beschreef enerzijds middels een ordenende terugblik degene die hij was geworden; anderzijds ontwierp hy ook zijn eigen ek tijdens het schrijven van de autobiografie. Daarom is iedere autobiografie per definitie literair, en heeft zij programmatisch de vrijheid zich tot fictie te ontwikkelen.¹⁷

Gusdorf (1980:38) calls autobiography a "second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself [sic] consciousness of it". Although he (Gusdorf 1980:38) then implicitly concedes the influence of experience in evaluating the past and its "corrective" function, he ignores the fictional implications of reconstructing experience. Returning to the past creates another dimension of experience which is superimposed on the previous and therefore it can never render an accurate or "truer" account of the past - perhaps more intense and condensed.

With regard to the relationship between fact and fiction, Van Buuren (1990:56) points to the impossible paradox of constructing a true reflection of life because the very act of writing presupposes the imposition of order on experience and intimates a personal selection of facts and a subjective perspective. This would be applicable to any factual or fictional account.

Renza (1977:1), in turn, regards the inherent duality of autobiographical writing which is expressed in the tension between fact and fiction, as the crux of autobiographical writing and writing in general. The discrepancy between the persona or "recollected self" and the author or "discursive self" (Renza 1977:24) constitutes the fictional/imaginative element (1977:2) of autobiography because he perceives the past from the vantage point of the present and in so doing reconstructs impressions and events. Thus, "autobiography is the writer's attempt to elucidate his present, not his past" (Renza 1977:3) and as Renza (1977:2) quite rightly asserts, the act of

17 Translation: Each autobiographer describes on the one hand the person that he has become by means of an ordered retrospective glance, and on the other hand he also designs his own self during the act of writing the autobiography. Therefore each autobiography is literary by definition and possesses the liberty to develop into fiction.

writing is an act of self-reflection, which consequently imparts a quality of objectivity or distance because it presupposes a selection of facts.¹⁸ In fact, it allows scope for the intrusion of an ironic vision of the past in terms of the present (Renza 1977:3) and therefore also emphasizes that the literary quality of autobiography evolves from the interpretation of the present.

Janet Varner Gunn (1982:18) takes it one step further and also refers to the future when she stresses that the "autobiographical effort of possessing one's life must be understood as a movement toward possibility as much as a turning around to the already achieved".¹⁹ As far as the role of the reader is concerned, Gunn (1982:20) distinguishes two modes of interpretive activity, "participatory and distantiating". While the former implies a process of discovery, the latter mode "enables the reader to look at the universe of common experience from a perspective different from his or her own".

The vantage point in the present is perceived by Gunn (1982:120) as "the self's location in a world" or his/her "worldliness" and clearly indicates the narrator's relationship to society. The traditional concept of autobiography as self within the world is superseded by the notion that the individual is part of the world and his/her selfhood is constituted by the dialectic between the personal and the social. The basic question that needs to be asked by the autobiographical self then becomes "*where do I belong?* not *who am I?*" (Gunn 1982:23). Therefore Gunn's (1982) definition of autobiography, included in the subtitle to her text as "a poetics of

18 When Renza (1977:6) notes the "human tendency to universalize, to make public or representable images out of, personal memories" he acknowledges that writing is a public act.

19 Gunn (1982:59) furthermore explains the concept of presence by saying that

It represents an act both of discovery and creation that involves, at the same time, the movement of the self *in* the world, recognizing that "the land makes man", and the movement of the self *into* the world, recognizing as well that "man elects his land".

experience", seems singularly appropriate as a description of women's autobiographical fiction.

Another significant aspect of contemporary women's autobiography is its reciprocal quality, because Gunn (1982:22) asserts that self-knowledge can only be meaningful when seen in relation to others. She contends that traditional autobiographical theory overlooks "the fact that my own view of myself (from the other side of the mirror) means little without the other's view of me and, concomitantly [sic], my view of the other" (1982:136). With statement, she asserts the most important aspect of autobiography, its "plural reflexivity" which implies "continuing interpretation in order to mean at all" (Gunn 1982:141) and simultaneously, if implicitly, draws attention to the open ending of autobiographical texts. She also refers to dual narration - often multiple narration in documentaries - of contemporary women's autobiography by pointing out that "If self-realization must be gained from the ways the self is known by others, authorship of autobiography, in effect, is always multiple" (Gunn 1982:141).

Thirdly, the influence of ideology and context in interpretation and the eventual change in perspective are raised. Van Buuren (1990:51) points out how seemingly irrelevant details acquire meaning when pondered on in retrospect and emphasizes the role of context when he claims that "handeligen en gebeurtenissen hebben betekenis binnen een context en die contexten op hun beurt krijgen betekenis binnen een globaal kader".²⁰ Van Buuren (1990:53) points out that identity is shaped by the experience of cultural environment which can be expressed as stories/literature. Consequently, he (Van Buuren 1990:54) relates identity with history/story when he claims that

'Identiteit' is dus, net zoals 'geschiedenis', nauw verwant met het begrip 'verhaal'. Voor beide aspecten van de biografie (biografie als geschiedenis en biografie als beschrijving van een

20 Translation: Actions and events acquire meaning within a context and contexts in turn acquire meaning within a global framework.

persoonlijkheid) geldt dat ze niet ergens worden aangetroffen, maar dat ze worden gemaakt.²¹

Furthermore, he (Van Buuren 1990:57) emphasizes that "het verhaal de onontbeerlijke bemiddeling [is] waarzonder men zich geen voorstelling van het leven kan maken".²² This situation is applicable to both the narrator and the reader and plays a major role in the testimonial and the picaresque.

Thus the original intention of the author has become more complex in the contemporary autobiography where self-knowledge and exemplary conduct are no longer the determinative factors because of the intrusion of irony which expresses the disparity between past and present and the implicit selection and suppression of facts. The literary nature of autobiography then assumes prominence so that the subject is superseded and qualified by the manner of presentation. Howarth (1980:86) asserts that autobiography is "an artful invention ... for it welcomes all the devices of skilled narration and observes few of the restrictions - accuracy, impartiality, inclusiveness - imposed upon other forms of historical literature". Consequently, autobiography as fiction is transmuted into fiction as autobiography where the formal and meta-textual assume an important function in the rendition of experience.

Although autobiographies by women appeared during the first half of twentieth century, Janeway (1979:360) remarks that they were usually written by women who had achieved success in some field or were the wives of important men. It is then to counteract this form of absence or oppression, that self-definition within society and the assertion of female experience as an alternative dimension have evolved as the predominant

21 Translation: "Identity" is therefore, just like "history", closely related to the concept of "story". For it is valid that both aspects of biography (biography as history and biography as description of a personality) are not found somewhere but are made/constructed.

22 Translation: The story is an indispensable means without which one cannot imagine life

impulses behind contemporary women's autobiography.²³ Heilbrun (1989:15) asserts that, by denying anger women are incapable of expressing themselves publicly and they often take "refuge in depression or madness". By implication then, writing enables women to gain control of their lives and assume a position of power in discourse (Heilbrun 1989:17).

Therefore, in the first instance, it must be accepted that writing has become a means to self-knowledge for women. As Lagos-Pope (1987:72) aptly observes:

Uno de los temas más importantes y frecuentes entre las escritoras ha sido y sigue siendo la exploración de la identidad femenina en un intento por autoconocerse, por escribirse y así verbalizar la experiencia femenina.²⁴

The predominantly subjective aspect of women's fiction is explained by Aralia López González (1988:14) as an attempt to integrate the individual and personal into the social and the collective and she describes it as "una de las posibles formas de indagar el mundo, pues al objetivar la historia personal, también se objetiva la historia, la colectiva, y se explica e incorpora la realidad".

From a slightly different angle, Nancy Walker (1990:21) explains women's writing as an act of self-definition which "is in part a direct response to cultural chaos. To write, or appear to write, of direct personal experience

23 Barry (1989:562) also points to the role of women's biographical writing as an assertion of female difference within a socio-historical context:

By definition, biography must know women as diverse *in the ways they experience their own diversity*, and therefore it can be an important genre for learning how race and sex intersect in women's lives.

24 Translation: One of the most important and predominant themes among women authors has been, and still continues to be, the exploration of feminine identity and a quest for self-knowledge, to write herself and thus verbalize feminine experience.

is to emphasize isolation while at the same time seeking connection".²⁵ Thus, by "breaking the silence"²⁶ imposed by dominant ideologies and committing their experience to paper, women - and other marginalized people as well - attempt to define both their personal and social identity and "claim a fuller subjectivity than history has offered them this far" (Barry 1989:576). The act of writing then not only produces meaning and understanding but it also makes the personal public. An autobiographical text then becomes an exercise in self-knowledge through the subject's interaction with society.

While Heilbrun (1989:37) perceives writing as an ordering process, she also spells out its meaningfulness in terms of interpretation when she asserts that "we live our lives through texts. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives".²⁷ So, in order to construct a new identity she (Heilbrun 1989:60) implies that women must destroy or ignore the "conventional" narratives/myths of patriarchy. In this respect, the introduction of the picaresque in women's fiction does not overtly destroy traditional myths, but it emphasizes the relevance of modes and their potential for subverting the male canon while the *pícaro* as protagonist emphasizes the marginality of women.

2.3 The origin and function of the picaresque

The picaresque is recognized by several contemporary authors as the predecessor of the modern novel. Carpentier (1981:193) stresses the fact that the contemporary novel emerged with the invention of the picaresque which addressed the realism of daily life and the concomitant significance of the individual - as represented by the first-person narrator.

25 Walker (1990:21) is particularly aware of the predicament of minority women, such as black or Indian women, who have had "the problems of selfhood and isolation ... compounded by cultural as well as gender barriers".

26 An expression coined by Tillie Olson (1980).

27 The relationship established by Van Buuren (1990:54) between experience and fiction is also expressed by Heilbrun.

González Echevarría (1990:56) also emphasizes the importance of the picaresque with regard to Latin American narrative, when he claims that it is an attempt at legitimization. He asserts that

It would be limiting not to see the development of Latin American narrative against the backdrop of the emerging modern novel in the Picaresque. The two are not only coeval, but are produced within a broader context, or text, of which they are versions and, in some cases, perversions. When seen in the context of the foregoing discussion the Picaresque appears as an allegory of legitimization.

Consequently, he (González Echevarría 1990:70) then perceives the picaresque as a palimpsest of modes of individual expression and assertion. It is this versatile character of the picaresque and its mixture of realism and fiction, which enables it to still occupy a watershed position in the evolution of contemporary fictional narrative.

Although the picaresque is often designated as a genre or subgenre (Fowler 1985:122), I shall discuss its contemporary form in terms of a "mode" according to the relevant characteristics suggested by Fowler (1985): its mutability, adaptability and fresh approach to the picaresque victim as a woman; its combination of repertoires from the autobiographical, testimonial and metafictional modes; subversive and inversive functions - the presence of irony - and its postmodernist approach. As the *pícaro* has been substituted for a *pícaro* the element of satirical parody is also present. Fowler (1985:107) maintains that "a mode announces itself by distinct signals, even if these are abbreviated, unobtrusive, or below the threshold of modern attention". As the picaresque contains a hidden agenda of social critique which is articulated within an autobiographical frame,²⁸ it is thus a form of subversion.

28 It is interesting to note that the Personal Narratives Group (1989:100), who show an acute awareness of the manipulative character of literary modes, contend that "men often depended on the picaresque to tell their stories, whereas the women chose a variety of other forms". This perception seems to be disproved by the contemporary emergence of the mode in women's literature.

The first picaresque text is generally accepted to be *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades* published anonymously in 1554. As *Lazarillo*²⁹ exemplifies most of the characteristics usually attributed to the picaresque, I shall briefly outline the seminal features manifested in the text here and then indicate how these were later progressively adapted in other works belonging to the same mode. In reaction to the romances of chivalry,³⁰ the picaresque introduces an element of realism in the persona of the *pícaro* who is usually a youth of uncertain birth from the periphery of society who struggles to become part of that society. This antithesis is perceived by Van Gorp (1978:15) who points out that the *pícaro* indicates political disillusionment in contrast with the gentleman. In brief, the picaresque is an autobiographical, retrospective account of personal experience recounted against the backdrop of a corrupt society. Consequently he is both the victim and victimizer of that society.

Lazarillo was followed by another seminal text written in two parts, called *La vida del pícaro Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599-1604) by Mateo Alemán.³¹ Although written in the picaresque vein, the tone differs considerably from that of *Lazarillo*. In contrast to *Lazarillo*'s light-hearted irony, Guzmán conveys a moral tone filled with bitterness and disillusionment. Other examples of the picaresque evolved in the seventeenth century with the publication of various texts such as *La pícara Justina* (1605)³² attributed to Francisco López de Ubeda, and another well known one called *La historia del Buscón don Pablos, ejemplo de vagabundos y espejo de tacaños* (1626) by Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas.

- 29 This will be the abbreviated form of the title used subsequently.
- 30 García López (1974:181) notes the contrast between the two types of literature when he claims that "La figura y el ambiente social del protagonista se oponen diametralmente a los de las novelas caballerescas" [The person and social ambience of the protagonist are diametrically opposed to that of the romances of chivalry].
- 31 Alemán's novel was known throughout the seventeenth century as "El pícaro" de Alemán. At the time of publication it was immensely popular and translated into several European languages.
- 32 Other novels featuring women protagonists were *La hija de Celestina* (1612) by Salas Barbadillo and *La garduña de Sevilla* (1642) by Castillo de Solórzano.

The term *picaresque* was only applied in retrospect once other works of similar character were published. Sieber (1977:17) reminds us that the establishment of the picaresque as an accepted literary mode was consolidated by the publication of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) which, although quite different in theme and voice, also has a peripatetic protagonist, episodic narrative style and strongly ironic intent.

Although the picaresque originated in response to and as an exposition of the unstable, corrupt society in Spain in the sixteenth century, its general character of social critique infuses it with a universal quality. As the *pícaro/a* is seen as the product of a corrupt society, his/her plight then becomes an indictment of social hypocrisy which also implicates the reader.

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 voiced on the subject. However, several generally acknowledged strains of it reappear intermittently in world literature, notably in German, French and English³³ literature until the present.³⁴

The contemporary picaresque has emerged in various forms or manifestations (Jáen 1987), as mutations (Sieber 1977; Brink 1990) and transformations (Earle 1988). Consequently, the many-faceted or protean character of the contemporary picaresque makes it difficult to identify and Alter (1965:vii) readily acknowledges this when he points to inevitable changes in context and technique:

Quite naturally, when the picaresque novel begins to cross national and temporal boundaries, it suffers many land and sea changes; so

33 The eighteenth century deserves special mention for the works of Defoe (*Moll Flanders*, 1722), Fielding (*Tom Jones*, 1749) and Smollett (*Peregrine Pickle*, 1751).

34 Miller (1967:99) relates the emergence of the picaresque in twentieth-century fiction to modern man's fragmented conception of the world, because he perceives the *pícaro/a* as a suitable metaphor for expressing our modern existence.

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that while central continuities must be kept in sight, it is also important to realize that one encounters varieties of picaresque experience, and not simply *the* picaresque experience.

Various attempts have been made to define the characteristics of the picaresque since its appearance in the sixteenth century, but I shall confine myself to a brief survey of the main approaches that capture the essential spirit of the mode. Two of the main approaches are represented by Burón (1971) and Wicks (1974), respectively, who both propose a modal approach but differ essentially on emphasis. The third, proposed by Smith (1988) is based on the dialectic between fact and fiction which is a hallmark of the picaresque and a central issue in postmodernist fiction.

In an overview of the most significant critical opinions from the sixteenth century to the present, Burón (1971) points out that three main stances on the picaresque are all marred by deficiencies resulting from an exclusive preoccupation with only one aspect of the text. He designates them as the "restringente" which is restricted to the person of the *plcaro* or to his social circumstances,³⁵ the "ampliativa" which includes too wide a range of texts resulting in a loss of character³⁶ and the "neutra" which is too analytical and does not take sufficient account of historical context.³⁷ All of these approaches take the two traditionally acknowledged picaresque novels as points of departure: *Lazarillo* and *Guzmán*. I shall be referring to *Lazarillo* as point of orientation in this respect.

Burón (1971:23) isolates satire and by implication irony, or to use his designation, "convivencia humana" as the main impetus in a picaresque text and stresses that

35 Here Burón (1971) mentions Parker (1967) as an example.

36 Lewis's (1961) "picaresque saint" is cited here as an example.

37 Here Miller's (1967) approach is criticized.

la picaresca es, básicamente, satírica; y satírico es decir, de acusación y protesta (no hábito ni aceptación gustosa), es en ella su propósito.³⁸

Burón (1971:182) emphasizes that the picaresque is not prescriptive in the sense that it wishes to prevent or open the eyes of innocents but it wishes to shame or shock the habitues. However, despite Burón's contention that satire is the qualifying factor of the picaresque spirit and that it has a universal application, he (Burón, 1971:149) misses the point entirely when he claims that conventional features such as the person of the *pícaro/a* and the autobiographical stance are important but not strictly necessary. He fails to recognize that the first person persona/consciousness, retrospective stance and open ending are important aspects of the quality of irony which he has identified. It is, in fact, the ironic stance which affects the interpretation.

In a similar vein to Burón, Wicks (1974:240) attempts to reconcile the various perspectives by identifying the essential features of the picaresque. He claims that it is either perceived as fossilized or closed which implies that it is either too context bound or too open as a text. In the first instance, the ironic quality and the social critique are ignored and in the second instance, diluted. To avoid the former, he proposes a deductive method based on a wide spectrum of modes such as devised by Scholes (1969) in which satire and the picaresque are both represented on an interchangeable plane on which romance and satire constitute opposite poles. In conclusion, Wicks (1974:243) envisages that the modal-generic approach :

allows a perspective on fiction that is broad enough to recognize the larger fictional fixtures in any particular work - "picaresque elements in *Don Quijote*," for example - and specific enough to account for a particular group of works that share enough attributes

38 Translated: the picaresque is basically satirical, and its intention is satirical in the sense of an accusation and a protest (not in the sense of convention or entertainment).

to make them identifiable as belonging to a particular genre, to which *Don Quijote* may not belong.

Whereas Burón (1971) then regards satire as an essential quality of the picaresque mode, Wicks (1974:240) regards satire and the picaresque as distinct but interchangeable modes. In contrast to these approaches, Smith (1988) endorses a thematic/structural focus to address the dialectic between "reality" and fiction - an approach elaborated on in Chapter 5. In this thesis I propose that all three approaches could be successfully applied in an analysis of contemporary picaresque fiction.

The complexity and significance of the picaresque as a mode are evident in the varied critical responses it has evoked. In fact, Smith (1988:79) suggests that

The abundance and variety of this 'secondary' literature not only demonstrates the continued importance of the genre to a modern audience; it also suggests that picaresque narrative presents contradictions or problems which remain unsolved and which may, indeed, prove to be insoluble.

This complex quality is also echoed by Wicks (1974:244) who emphasizes the autobiographical aspect when he claims that the genuine picaresque is:

from a formal standpoint, a good deal more subtle and ambiguous than earlier critics and literary historians found it to be, perhaps because in our post-Jamesian awareness of point of view we are more interested in such subtleties and ambiguities. As a result, the narrative function of autobiographical and confessional forms has become a significant subject to critical exploration.

As literature is a subjective matter and cannot be summarily categorized, I would hesitate to suggest an inflexible or dogmatic definition for the contemporary picaresque.³⁹ However, with reference to the previous

discussion and the perspectives illustrated, a broad working definition of the essential spirit of the picaresque would evince a satirical, ironically imbued view of society as represented from an autobiographical (retrospective) stance. I would therefore presume to define the contemporary picaresque as consistent with the following tenets: it can be seen as an account of the experiences of a first-person male/female narrator/consciousness of uncertain origin (as reflected in the arbitrary choice of name) and hence with no emotional ties (no knowledge of love and affection), who struggles to survive in an inhospitable and hypocritical society with no education and consequently no respectable occupation and is forced to lead a peripatetic existence. The retrospective, mature stance of the protagonist/narrator is particularly relevant to the interpretation of the open ending. This definition seems to accommodate both form/mode and content/theme.

2.4 Aspects of the picaresque

2.4.1 *The testimonial character of the mode*

Protest has found expression in autobiographical or testimonial literature - a strong element in contemporary Latin American literature as illustrated by Alicia Partnoy's book entitled *You Can't Drown the Fire*. According to Janeway (1979:346), autobiographies or testimonials expressing lived-experience attempt to determine the influences which have shaped them, "the origin and meaning of their lives" and to search for "a new image with which to explain life" (Janeway 1979:386). This inclination is emblematic of any new literature where the concern with self-expression is predominant and concern with form and language occupies a secondary position as Janeway (1979:347) explains:

the close involvement of many women writers with their material seems to minimize their interest in form itself. The novelty in this

39 As Miller (1967:3) points out: "Each work of art is finally individual. And even the best genre definition will never attain its goal; it will always describe an 'ideal type', to use René Wellek's phrase, not an empirical reality".

work lies in a new vision of experience, not - or rarely - in its expression. The innovation most often seen is a mingling of fiction and autobiography.

Apart from self-expression, women's writing also asserts a social value which is common to all female experience.⁴⁰ Janeway (1979:344) insists that a women's literature should be explored for its contribution to "our understanding of the human condition", as a complementary aspect of it, and not for its unique quality. It must therefore not be seen as a rejection but an extension of existing values (Janeway 1979:345). The social value is underlined in the work of The Personal Narratives Group (1989:6) who stress the importance of autobiographical writing in the evaluation of power relations and individual and social relationships because, "personal narratives such as these allow us to see lives as simultaneously individual and social creations, and to see individuals as simultaneously the changers and the changed".

However, form still remains an important interpretive code and the choice of autobiography as a genre also poses some significance for interpretation. The Personal Narratives Group (1989:100) emphasise the form of a narrative, asserting that in "the process of self-interpretation, the most salient aspect of the personal narrative, is partially revealed through the choice of narrative form". For example, letter writing was an important form of personal narrative in the nineteenth century because it represented a means of recounting women's personal lives against the stifling backdrop of patriarchally-supported middle-class bourgeois norms.

According to Barry (1989:561), then, biographical writing - and by implication autobiographical writing - provides the ideal vehicle for expressing the progression from personal to political in women's

40 In a discussion of four women's autobiographies from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Mason (1980:235) also concludes that despite the differences between the women, their stories and the way they have been told, they have told an "essential" story about themselves, about women and autobiography. They provide a dramatization of: "self-realization" and "self-transcendence". This is also the aim of my thesis.

experience/subjectivity as it "can become a study of social interactions" by breaking down the barrier between personal life and politics. She (Barry 1989:561) emphasizes the importance of a socio-historical context, stressing that "lives do not become historical because they are individual" but that women need to be "treated as a sex-class" to be recognized. Barry (1989:562) stresses the crucial role of context in the women's struggle, claiming that "it matters greatly how women conceptualize themselves in relation to history" and encapsulates the entire spirit of autobiography in her following statement:

It is my thesis that the extent, nature, and impact of the history available to anyone will shape their subjective realization of their past which is the reference point from which, in the moment of the present, the future is conceived.

This notion also echoes the underlying argument of the picaresque mode and illuminates the ironic perspective encountered in it.

Although autobiography was then at first used as a form of self-expression, this incentive was replaced by a more assertive intention. Women wanted to publicize their oppression and indict the oppressors at the same time. Such a strategy needed a more subtle approach because they had to convince the other camp without alienating them. This change of approach is particularly evident in much of women's writing today and especially in the testimonial and picaresque modes.

The confessional novel and the *Bildungsroman* fall within the range of personal or autobiographical writing but their scope, with regard to initial motivation and subject matter, is more restricted than that of testimonial writing. Whereas the *Bildungsroman* focuses on individual development within society which is closely related to autobiography,⁴¹ the confessional

41 Nancy Walker (1990:76) defines the *Bildungsroman* as "traditionally the story of a young man achieving maturity by testing himself against the values of his society and emerging as a distinct individual". She relates this "pattern of individuation" to traditional autobiography. In fact, it becomes difficult to distinguish the *Bildungsroman* from the contemporary autobiography but the

is an attempt by the narrator/protagonist to understand actions committed in the past and it is also self-directed. Spender (1980:121) defines confessional autobiography as follows: it "may be a search for values, or even an attempt to justify the writer by an appeal to the lack of them". According to Axthelm (1967:97), the *raison d'être* of the modern confessional novel is more secular in that "confronted with the disintegration and uncertainty of the modern condition, man is challenged to find new principles of order and meaning to guide his existence".

It could be mentioned here that "African autobiography" as exemplified in Es'kia Mphahlele's work shows a definite communal, collective orientation and forms an interesting link with Latin-American testimonial literature. Like testimonial literature, African autobiography usually promotes the good of a community through the actions and experiences of an individual from the perspective of the relevant individual. In the South African context, it is usually an incriminating account of the apartheid system while the Latin American version, or testimonial, is also concerned with social indictment through the testimony of an individual victim who represents the marginalized population suffering under an oppressive social system. In this sense, it has much in common with the picaresque tradition but it relies overtly on historical evidence and referentiality for its validity. In brief, the *Bildungsroman* and confessional express the personal dimension while the testimonial illustrates the social through the personal - Tess, the protagonist in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* could serve as a classic example here.

The type of literature usually designated as **testimonial** originated mainly in Latin America during the last two to three decades.⁴² Consequently, its main characteristics will be discussed by referring to texts and literary criticism from that source. As it is impossible to attain final consensus about the definition and scope of testimonial literature within the

main difference could perhaps be perceived in the interpretation of events by the narrator.

42 Narvaéz (1986:246) estimates that the testimonial as genre originated about 1973 although Marta Rojas (1986:318) places it much earlier, after the Cuban revolution.

postmodernist paradigm,⁴³ I shall attempt to identify several recurrent trends or features which dominate this kind of writing.

Although the term seems to have been universally accepted, at least by Latin Americans,⁴⁴ its place within the literary spectrum is still under debate. As it has originated in reaction to a specific political context and could deputize as a sub-genre for autobiographical writing, I have designated it as a mode,⁴⁵ similar to the picaresque. Consequently, its main function would be, as a literary code, to interact with social context and Narvaéz (1986:271) points out that this quality of "un texto dinámico que nos representa multifragmentadamente la historia del período, nos muestra también el desplazamiento del sujeto".⁴⁶

The undoubted political incentive behind testimonial writing makes it an eminently suitable channel/forum of protest for minority groups and women. Dorfman (1986:177) clearly perceives this political aspect when he defines the main functions of testimonial literature as: an accusation against the perpetrators of oppression; a reminder of past suffering; an encouragement to react to oppression past and present; and a deterrent for future generations from committing the same errors. He (Dorfman 1986:179) summarizes these ideas in the simple sentence "Para que el

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- 43 This elusive quality is underlined by Marta Rojas (1986:315) who mentions the disparity in opinions voiced on and about testimonial writing. In an attempt to define testimonial writing, Casaus (1986b:335) also points out that its most important characteristic is its resistance to classification. Due to its dynamic interaction with context and its response and adaptation to change/circumstances, it is difficult to define.
- 44 Marta Rojas (1986:315) points out that the Casa de las Américas award to testimonial literature served to establish its prestige and popularity.
- 45 Narvaéz (1986:239) for example, is careful to qualify his use of the term by referring to its ambivalent nature. He (Narvaéz 1986:267) contends that "hasta este momento, con contadas excepciones, no ha ido acompañada de una conciencia que le transforme en un género para sí" [until now, with few exceptions, it has not been characterized by a conscience which transforms it into a separate genre].
- 46 Translation: A dynamic text which presents the history of the period in a multi-fragmented way and also shows us the displacement of the subject.

futuro sea diferente (para que se dé curso y ejecute al juicio meramente moral), el pasado deberá retenerse".⁴⁷ These thoughts remain central in women's testimonials as well, if only to mention Poniatowska and Allende's belief in the efficacy of remembering the past. Experience attains meaning when it is recorded and, even more so when it is interpreted to transmit a message.

Testimonial literature then relates the history of people silenced by oppression, without a history (Fornet 1986:345). It is within this context that Manzor-Coats (1990:158) designates testimonial literature as a "marginal genre" which is capable of expressing marginal experience.⁴⁸ Yet, Chandra Mohanty (1991:37) clearly spells out the significance of testimonies when she emphasizes their interpersonal quality: "Finally, the idea of plural or collective consciousness is evident in some of the revolutionary testimonials of Latin American women, speaking *from within* rather than *for* their communities".

Barnet (1986a:301) stresses the role of memory in the transcription of tradition and history when he claims that

La tradición se compone de todos los bienes espirituales del hombre. Un pueblo sin tradición es como un árbol sin hojas, un pueblo sin memoria es un pueblo desválido. Dentro de las obras de fundación la novela-testimonio debe contribuir a esa memoria.⁴⁹

Testimonial literature can therefore be seen to act as the unofficial historical voice of the people (Narvaéz 1986:268) which complements and amplifies the impersonal historical records, or as Barnet (1986b:308)

47 Translation: If the future is to be different (to give direction and comply with moral judgement) the past ought to be retained.

48 Castillo (1992:34) remarks that the testimonial form and "both the more or less traditional autobiography and the more recent or anthropological reconstructions of oral history" are prevalent in Latin America and in Third World countries.

49 Translation: Tradition constitutes the total spiritual wealth of man. A nation without tradition is like a tree without leaves, a nation without memory is a nation without merit. Among the fundamental works, the testimonial novel should contribute to this memory.

describes it, "sirviendo a la vez de espejo cóncavo y retrovisor".⁵⁰ With regard to Rigoberta Menchú's testimony, Rice-Sayre (1986:52) comments that "experience is often a key element not because of volition but because outside forces are invading and shaping her experience and telling is a form of survival". From another perspective, Starcevik (1982:65) perceives: "This act of recollection and reportage is a statement of priorities. In our choice of topics we tell as much about ourselves as we do about the subject itself".

Having established that testimonial literature is political in origin and subversive in scope, one could attempt to determine predominant characteristics of the mode by examining its subject matter and technique of presentation.

Testimonial literature ranges under **autobiographical writing** because it shares the basic attributes of that genre.⁵¹ However, despite its recent origin, it constitutes the most direct form of the personal fiction which will be discussed in this thesis. The main reason for this lies in the primary purpose of presenting personal experience in denunciation of oppression or presenting the experience of a people through an individual who represents the collective consciousness (Barnet 1986a:288). Barnet (1986a:290-291) pinpoints the rationale behind the testimonial as imparting "conciencia de su tradición"⁵² which in turn means that "conocimiento de la realidad implica conocimiento de sí mismo".⁵³ The aesthetic value becomes subservient by exposing the other perspective, of re-vising reality. In this respect, context plays a major role and historical background has to be investigated to interpret the personal testimonial within that context.⁵⁴

50 Translation: Serving at the same time as a concave and a rear-view mirror.

51 It is an account of the life of a historical person and events. The first person protagonist's retrospective interpretation of his/her life forms the basis of this kind of writing/genre.

52 Translation: knowledge of his tradition

53 Translation: knowledge of reality implies self-knowledge

To Barnett's (1986a:297) way of thinking, the testimonial is not a historical book but a study of a character within his time. Through self-expression in writing, the narrator experiences a kind of catharsis/therapy and develops an awareness of aesthetic value which is reflected in the language. Yet, despite imposing order on reality, language also has to maintain the semblance of orality, the character of the spoken language (Barnett 1986:292). It is this quality which Fernández Olmo (1981:71) identifies when she claims that the author of a testimonial novel makes use of fictional devices without destroying the fundamental character of a testimony given by a witness, for example, in the cases of Jesusa in *Hasta no viste Jesús mío* and Poppie in *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena*.

As far as the subject matter is concerned, the main point of difference seems to lie in its relationship with reality. Prada Oropeza (1986:19-20) makes a distinction between testimonial literature and fiction based on its respective referential or aesthetic intention. He maintains that the subject matter is subordinate to the aesthetic intention in fiction while the referentiality is the predominant intention in the testimonial. This explanation concurs with Cavallari's (1986:73) slightly different perception which stresses a direct and indirect - in the case of fiction - relationship with reality and which he relates to the opposition between Nature and Culture. His observation anticipates and substantiates the gradual progression from the personal to the political noted in women's literature,

54 Casaús (1986:331) attributes great significance to this function of testimonial literature when he claims that

el testimonio colabora eficazmente en la tarea de mostrar el rostro verdadero del pueblo y de mantener vivas - como semilla necesaria para futuras transformaciones - las tradiciones y costumbres que integran las culturas nacionales.

[the testimonial collaborates effectively in the task of showing the true face of the people and keeping alive - a necessary seed for future transformations - the traditions and customs which integrate the national cultures].

that is, from lived experience to reconstructed experience and consequently universalized experience.⁵⁵

The resurgence of autobiographical writing, and testimonial in particular, in contemporary literature is emblematic of a different approach to the history/fiction debate. It is argued by several critics that no literary reconstruction of events can be "objective" and that the process of selection and ordering entails interpretation which results in the fictionalization of experience. Jara and Vidal (1986:2) explain this process by claiming that

El testigo, por cierto, no puede capturar toda la realidad - nadie puede hacerlo -, pero puede fijar y escudriñar sus huellas, trazar su imagen, proyectar la inmediatez de su inscripción, *re-presentar* aquello que por su lejanía - geográfica, histórica, corporal - amenaza con volverse inaccesible. Substituto de la memoria el testimonio puede *inventar* - en el sentido latino de *in-venire* - la memoria.⁵⁶

Interestingly, although she relegates testimonial literature to non-fiction, Amar Sánchez's (1990:448) description/definition of the mode anticipates the dialectic between fact and fiction evident in the contemporary picaresque and captures its ambivalence:

el relato de no-ficción, ... organiza un espacio 'desmitificador', fracturado en la medida en que se juega siempre en los bordes, en los márgenes de las formas, de lo literario y lo político, de lo imaginario y lo real. Planteado como un espacio de confluencia de diversas líneas, nunca es neutral porque trabaja la lucha y la contradicción: muy determinado por la escritura ya que señala continuamente su condición de testimonio y de investigación *escrita*,

55 It also confirms and explains the conscious exploitation of the picaresque mode noted in contemporary women's fiction.

56 Translation: The witness is certainly not able to capture all of reality - no one can do that - but he could determine and examine his tracks, trace his image, project the immediacy of his inscription, *re-present* that, which by its distance - geographical, historical and corporal - threatens to turn inaccessible. As substitution for memory the testimonial could *invent* - in the Latin sense of *in-venire* - memory.

sin embargo la fuerte presión de lo fáctico no hace más que negar su autonomía literaria y remarcar su dependencia de - y su conflicto con- lo real.⁵⁷

Seen from this perspective, neither history nor autobiography proper could be regarded as the products of the "objective" rendition of facts. Consequently, the "objective" nature of traditional reportage such as history and journalism also becomes questionable. As Prada Oropeza (1986:9) remarks:

todo discurso testimonial es siempre referencial y pretende un valor de verdad; además, es siempre intertextual pues, explícita o implícitamente *supone* una *otra* versión o interpretación (otro texto) sobre su objeto (referente).⁵⁸

It is this process of fictionalization which has elicited controversy in contemporary interpretations of testimonial literature. While it is generally claimed that the written interpretation by a mediator of an illiterate victim's experience is ideologically suspect and could be a misrepresentation of facts, others maintain that some form of protest/action is better than silence. In this respect, Dorfman (1986) makes a valuable contribution when he points out that though original in source, unedited versions of experience can result in disorganized renditions of experience which would deter the reader from participating and consequently destroy their aim of denouncing oppression and evoking sympathy. Dorfman (1986:194) points out some glaring deficiencies in the texts of "authentic"/unedited victims. Firstly, he stresses the value of language as means of communication and

57 Translation: the non-fiction tale, ...arranges a demystifying space, fractured in so far as it plays around the edges, in the margins of forms, the literary and the political, the imaginary and the real. Posited as a space where divergent lines converge, nothing is neutral because strife and contradiction are at work: very much determined by the writing which continually indicates its testimonial condition and *written* investigation, however, the strong pressure of the factual only negates literary autonomy and again indicates its dependence on - and its conflict - with the real.

58 Translation: each testimonial discourse is always referential and pretends a value of truth; besides, it is always intertextual because, explicitly or implicitly it presupposes another version or interpretation (another text) of its referent.

intimates that the lack of order in the rendition of experience defuses the impact of the message. He (Dorfman 1986:193) detects a discrepancy between emotion and language which implies that the author does not experience catharsis and thus gain self-knowledge and objectivity by ordering and reconsidering events in context, and the reader's attention is lost due to the lack of a conscious strategy of persuasion. He is supported in his criticism by Rojas (1986:323) who also underlines the crucial role of language asserting that

Ningún tema por grandioso que sea, por dramático, humano o espectacular que sea podríamos llevarlo fielmente al lector si no usamos un lenguaje adecuado. La defensa del testimonio está en la defensa del lenguaje; en la imaginación y talento de quienes lo escriben, además del hecho mismo: del protagonista, individual y colectivo.⁵⁹

This idea underpins Amar Sánchez's (1990:449) claim that the dual nature of testimonial literature requires a different reading strategy from that applicable to fiction or documentary sources when she points out that "el género exige una lectura que ponga el acento simultáneamente en su condición de relato y de testimonio periodístico".⁶⁰

As Amar Sánchez (1990:450) maintains that the subject represents the key to narrative transformation or fictionalization which forms the bridge between fiction and reality, it seems justified to regard the personal aspect in testimonial writing as a qualification of fictional writing because personal reportage undercuts the traditional objective and supposedly impartial stance of history and journalism. She (Amar Sánchez 1990:449) also takes cognizance of the textual "contamination" or mixture of genres -

59 Translation: No theme, however extravagant it might be, dramatic, human or spectacular it might be will be adequately conveyed to the reader if we do not use correct language. The defense of the testimony lies in the defense of the language; in the imagination and talent of those writing it, besides the deed itself: of the protagonist, individual and collective.

60 Translation: The genre necessitates a reading strategy which would simultaneously emphasize its character as a story and as a journalistic testimonial.

stylistic qualities - which exists between the factual and fictional works of the same author.

Prada Oropeza (1986:13) summarizes the main features of testimonial literature as it is expounded in this thesis, to be located in its referential and subjective qualities, the minimal use of manipulative literary modes, its political function and its relevance to contemporary society as an example, reminder and warning of oppression. The latter addresses the question of responsibility and how it should be interpreted.

2.4.2 The picaresque dimension: Irony and social critique

The most important aspect of the contemporary picaresque is the ironic stance of the protagonist. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the shift in the protagonist's stance from past life to present situation in contemporary autobiographical writing has also affected the interpretation of the picaresque which conforms to that paradigm. The main focus is directed at the reconstruction of events and the fact that the autobiography/personal account is still to continue - has an open ending - because the protagonist is still alive. Consequently, the past is used to interpret/justify the present and the reader is left to judge the success or failure of the attempt. It is then the disparity between the younger and more mature stances of the protagonist which creates moral ambiguity or a dual perspective in the contemporary picaresque. This dual perspective is often emphasized in women's literature with a male/female perspective of events.

From a contemporary perspective, it is apparent that the ironic stance in *Lazarillo* creates a moral ambiguity which has often resulted in distorted and erroneous interpretations, that is, the failure to recognize irony as a convention. Jáen (1968:134) argues that the clue to this ambiguity lies in the character of Lazarillo:

En la complejidad del protagonista y su perspectiva se encierran el sentido artístico y moral de la obra, los cuales constituyen, así, elementos inseparables dentro de la creación literaria.⁶¹

It is the difference between the young Lazarillo as character and the mature Lazarillo as retrospective narrator which lies at the root of the ambiguity.⁶² Jáen (1968:130) consequently warns that to perceive Lazarillo as a morally reformed character would be to ignore the definite ironical and satirical intent of the text. In fact, Lazarillo conforms to society and in so doing permanently dons the protean role dictated by a hypocritical society. Miller (1967:56) clearly points out this final irony when he states that

The beginnings of picaresque novels point, then, to a disordered world which the hero affirms by joining. By becoming a trickster, the hero makes the only choice other than suicide that the world offers him. If the world is tricky, peopled by tricksters, the picaro must either give up his personality to join the trickery or perish. The picaro always joins. But, and this must be underscored, the pattern of education into roguery by the world reflects on the world more than on the picaro. It is the world that is picaresque; the picaro only typifies that world in his dramatic change from innocent to trickster. In affirming the world's outer chaos by becoming a picaro, the hero gives up hope of personality and order. Having become a manipulator of appearances, the picaresque character settles into the non-reality of becoming an appearance himself.⁶³

61 Translation: The artistic sense and moral of the work, which thus constitute inseparable elements within the literary creation, are situated in the complexity of the protagonist and her perspective.

62 Rico (1979:54) makes the same comparison in his discussion of *Guzmán*.

63 The quality of disillusionment or "desengaño" is also identified by Van Gorp (1978:15) and Wicks (1972:242) who perceive the *pícaro* as both the victim of trickery and the trickster himself. Both Earle (1988:987) and Riggan (1981:20-21) comment on this negative view of life.

Consequently, the main thrust is directed at a corrupt society through the person of the *pícaro/a*. Ironically, the reader forms part of that society and has to suspend judgement. The first-person retrospective stance underlines the significance of the episodes recounted and intimates the final ironical stance of apparent 'integration' through 'subjection' but leaves matters unresolved. Here the 'protean' role (Earle 1988:989; Miller 1967:99) comes into play. Riggan (1981:24) clearly perceives the implications of this stance when he states that

Hence virtually everything which the narrator relates has value not only as information about his past but also as a characterization of the present individual. The information itself may tell us a good deal about the man's development, but the very selection of this information and any evaluation or commentary passed on it by the narrator also provide definite insights into his present nature.

The significance of the autobiographical element and the fact that the persona's present position is related in terms of his past, is also strongly emphasized by Rico (1984:10).

Two important devices which are developed in autobiographical writing, particularly (auto)biography and the picaresque, are the double persona and irony.⁶⁴ In fact, Walker (1990:78) identifies these as the two main features of the contemporary women's novel, viz. "fluidity of identity" and "a consciousness of the ironic distance between the self as formulated externally, by cultural heritage, and the self as an internal process of redefinition and discovery". Rice-Sayre (1986:51) also remarks on the pluralistic form/perspective of the testimonial when she claims that "*Testimonio* can suggest: giving evidence (in juridical law), bearing witness

As the word *pícaro* is a foreign word, I have italicized it in the text, but Miller and Wicks (1974:244) and other critics seem to use a hybrid form because the correct English term would be picaaroon.

64 These devices are also identified by Axthelm (1967:11) in confessional literature.

(in religion, and perhaps in natural law), writing autobiography, writing biography, and giving homage".

Walker (1990:28) perceives the use of irony as symptomatic of the feminist stance of re-vision when she claims that "the ironic stance, which insists upon the contrast between two alternate realities, forces a revision of the self that is objectified in the double narrative employed in so many of these novels". Irony's inherent ambivalence is often overlooked so that an author's social critique is often taken seriously, for example Nadine Gordimer in *A sport of nature*.

The ironic ambiguity resulting from the interaction of narrative stances becomes emblematic of the dialectic between fact and fiction. It is this feature of the picaresque which Smith (1988) emphasizes through the use of the notion of the interaction of time frames. This aspect is also discussed by Sieber (1977:18) who remarks that the inherent ambiguity of the text is situated in the "two temporal perspectives, one serving as a framework for the other", that is, the autobiographical and retrospective stances. In fact, Sieber (1977:74) claims that "the very nature of his 'speaking' presence is obliterated through the 'writing' of his life".

The act of reconstruction implies fictionalization and Wicks (1974:244) comments on the implication for the reader of *Lazarillo* when he states that the first-person narrative is a "fictional analogy of the tricks" played by the *pícaro/a*. He (Wicks, 1974:244) goes on to explain 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. First-person picaresque can thus be seen as a narrative version (between the *pícaro* and the willing reader 'victim') of the tricks in the *pícaro*'s remembered life experiences (between *pícaro* and his landscape).

Thus the reader becomes a victim of society like the *pícaro*.

2.4.3 The fictional aspect: Self-conscious writing

The Personal Narratives Group (1989:261) point out how, in a similar way to oral cultures, we draw parallels to understand our world where

elders tell life stories for the edification and socialization of children in the community. Knowing how and why such stories are true is part of the process of maturing, and is fundamental to intellectual, emotional, and social development. To understand one's own life in light of these stories is to be a full participant in a particular culture.

This interpretation of stories indicates the importance of literature in our lives and its contribution towards the enrichment of our experience. However, by confusing reality and fiction, Cervantes's *Don Quijote* also illustrates the subversive qualities of literature.

Nicole Ward Jouve (1991:185-186) maintains that the value of a collection of separate and disconnected stories such as *A thousand and one nights* (Scheherazade) lies in the appreciation of its multiplicity without attempting to "totalize" it :

Their plurality expresses for me what is one of the prime pleasures of the story, that it plays or should play with abundance, with the contrasts and contradictions of life, with high and low, not trying to make a whole out of them but letting each exist at its own pace and its own tone, letting each man and woman tell their story in their own words and with their own degree of wit, flamboyance, eloquence or rumbustiousness.

Ward Jouve (1991:186) explains her use of the term "totalization" as "the drive to homogenize experience by making what is diverse and specific into a unified whole". Although she is comparing a novel with a collection of short stories, I find this a suitable approach to interpret the differences in culture and gender in South Africa - even the differences among women from different cultures.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned quotation is not only significant for its implicit affirmation of the therapeutic value of fiction but also for the interesting correlation which can be drawn between the novel and the episodic structure of the picaresque tradition which initiated it.

Vargas Llosa (1987:2) points out the complex nature of "history" and its ambiguous relationship with "reality" and "fiction", intimating that truth is complemented by fictional attributes.⁶⁵ As the way in which an event is told could influence its interpretation, even documented historical material would be suspected of concealed attitudes and ideologies.

Although "reality" and fiction are inextricably intertwined and difficult to separate in the early chronicles, Vargas Llosa (1987:5) argues that such a combination provides the reader with an additional fount of information on the specific period and that the underlying fears, attitudes and ideologies which inevitably "spice" the testimonies/documents could also help to define the extent of their fictitious parameters. With this conclusion, he defines the character of Latin American and some post-colonial narrative.

As far as the concept of the novel is concerned, Barnet (1986a:280) criticizes the restrictive definition usually applied to the novel and asserts that it has enforced a separation of spiritual riches. Like Vargas Llosa (1987), Barnet (1986b:280) stresses fiction's dynamic social function in fusing the imaginary with the real and claims that

Al contrario, en ese todo orgánico se mezclaban, se confundían la razón y el mito. Eso era arte. (Y arte integral que no separaba la realidad de la fantasía, la política de la religión; arte que imitaba la vida y la vida que imitaba al arte, ambos complementándose.) En esos relatos, en esas narraciones, había una conciencia de ser, de estar en el mundo.⁶⁶

65 It is also interesting to note that the Spanish word "historia" denotes both history and story/narrative.

66 Translation: On the contrary, here everything organic was mingled and reason and myth confused. This was art. (And integral art which did not separate

This mixture of fact/history and fiction is reminiscent of Nadine Gordimer's fiction where she adopts a stance of telling history from the "inside", as subjective experience; but where, as Shula Marks (1989:40) points out, the historical validity of her narrative is coloured by her personal position as historical subject.

The interdependence of myth and history is undeniable in Latin American fiction and González Echevarría (1990:6) is careful to emphasize this connection when he states:

Given that myths are stories whose main concern is with origins, the interest of Latin American fiction in Latin American history and myth are understandable.

Two elements of the picaresque are important in the postmodernist concept of the mode. Firstly, the retrospective autobiographical stance which implies a consciously "fictional" - that is, an enhanced and biased - account of the protagonist's life. The *pícaro/a* is aware of the impression he is creating and as Sieber (1977:16) aptly states, "while disclosing but simultaneously 'blinding' the reader into accepting his dishonourable situation, he is able to sell himself and thus to survive". This makes the *pícaro/a*'s motivation for his retrospective account questionable.

The juxtaposition of past and present events focuses the reader's attention on the narrative act itself and he/she concludes that lessons so well learnt could not easily be forgotten. As Lazarillo reconstructs fictional accounts to justify his present position, so Eva Luna tells stories for survival and we are finally prompted to regard these concepts as synonymous. The "realistic" element has to be made palatable by the fictitious, the bitter pill of critique has to be sweetened to be fed to an unsuspecting reader/public. The reader can either remain impervious/oblivious to the impact of the critique and dissociate himself/herself from the rest of society - somewhat

reality from fantasy, politics from religion; art which imitated life and life which imitated art, both complementing each other). In these tales, in these narratives, there was a consciousness of being, of being in the world.

reminiscent of Gulliver (*Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift's novel, originally published in 1726) and with the same ironical thrust - or accept responsibility.

Secondly, the open ending - where the reader is left to draw his/her own conclusions - is therefore a crucial aspect of the picaresque which emphasizes the ironical intent. Sieber (1977:17) draws particular attention to these elements in the text because the cynicism so apparent in the ending becomes "one of the fundamental hall-marks of later *pícaro*-authors".

3 A PERSONAL TESTIMONY: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND/AS FICTION

3.1 Women and testimonial writing: (Auto)biography

Testimonial writing occupies an important place within the autobiographical paradigm. Although the protagonist in testimonial literature is a historical person¹ whose life is recounted in retrospect, it differs from the autobiography with regard to its intent and subject: the roots of testimonial writing are embedded in protest and its protagonists/narrators are the marginalized people in society. Prada Oropeza (1986:7/10) refers to the first chronicles as examples of testimonial literature in which self-justification was the main aim and points out that contemporary testimonial literature has a different objective: denunciation instead of justification.

Jara (1986:3) makes a distinction between documentary writing - such as autobiography - and testimonial writing, claiming that successful testimonials are more universal in scope and lack the narcissistic element of the autobiography. This statement underlines the evolution from personal to political which is so evident in postcolonial women's literature and corroborates Rigoberta Menchú's claim to be "voicing the collective speech of her people" (Rice-Sayre 1986:49). Within the Latin American context, the works of writers such as Miguel Barnet and Elena Poniatowska have contributed to the popularity of testimonial literature (Fernández Olmo 1981:70).

The experience of the narrator/protagonist is reconstructed, either by herself or with the aid of a facilitator,² to serve as an explicit

1 Poniatowska (1989a:9) asserts that Jesusa's real name was Josefina Bórquez.

2 Several terms could be used to describe this function. Steele (1989:319), for instance, calls him/her a transcriber or editor, while Lagos-Pope (1990:343) refers to an interlocutor. Barry (1989:566) explains the role of the biographer/facilitator:

condemnation of oppression and express implicit solidarity with the other victims of society. While Prada Oropeza (1986:16) emphasizes the significance of an alternative perspective by claiming that "el discurso testimonio afirma su verdad de una realidad, frente a una afirmación contradictoria"³, Fernández Olmo (1981:75) emphasizes its social significance when she attributes it with a "carácter democratizante" [a democratic character].

The emphasis is then placed on first-hand experience whether expressed personally or through a facilitator/mediator. In the case of a facilitator or biographer, we concern ourselves with (auto)biography which is also a form of testimonial literature. Two texts by Elsa Joubert (South Africa) and Elena Poniatowska (Mexico), illustrate how the referential and fictional interact to create (auto)biography where the protagonists remain engaged in a sustained dialogue with the facilitators. Originating from postcolonial societies, both texts are interpreted by women from European cultures who interview women from marginalized cultures. Despite this disparity in cultures, these texts assert the germination of a feminist consciousness and social critique which will come to fruition in the contemporary *pícaro* as depicted by Gordimer and Allende (see Chapters 4 and 5).

From a socio-political perspective, the initial impulse to bear testimony is not located in aesthetic value but rather in coming to terms with experience and denouncing oppression,⁴ and sophisticated writing skills are therefore not deemed strictly necessary. However, from a literary perspective, it could be argued that language incompetence - or clumsy expression - could

Explicit biographical interpretation takes place on two levels: the subject's interpretation of her interactions and the biographer's interpretation of the subject's interactions

- 3 Translation: Testimonial discourse affirms its (own) truth of reality in contrast to an oppositional one (affirmation).
- 4 Jorgensen (1988b:82) points out that the publication of essays, poetry and testimonial literature on historical events such as Tlatelolco - which is discussed more fully elsewhere - constitute a necessary and urgent reaction to repression.

distort the message which must, in turn, adversely influence the interpretation of a text.

Two significant factors then influence the testimonial literature of marginalized societies and in particular women's literature: the inability to express personal experience in writing due to the lack of education and the presence of ideological factors. In her attempt to render an authentic account of her experience, the author is impeded by the constraints of dominant cultures, languages and social structures and in the case of deprived communities, illiteracy. Johnson (1983:157) identifies illiteracy as an inhibiting factor which "impeded the vast majority of the New World's females from documenting their daily lives and from recording personal feelings and responses to the quality of their existence". Ironically, as Narvaéz (1986:273) is careful to point out, illiteracy also frustrates the social and literary function of testimonial literature as alternative history.

Apart from the fact that ostensibly objective reportage such as historical documentation has become suspect within the postmodernist paradigm which assumes that ideological intrusion is inevitable in literature, the introduction of a facilitator to interpret orally recounted experience implies a double interference of ideological influences in both the primary and secondary accounts.⁵ Thus, whatever strategy is followed to ensure the accurate transmission/transcription of facts, Bruce-Novoa (1990:116) claims that ideology surfaces in various guises, so that even

when the testimony comes directly from the oppressed, the language and forms through which they express themselves often derive from the dominant sector. More than a problem of surface language, this situation reflects an often deep-seated interiorization of the dominant, repressive ideology on the part of the oppressed.

The introduction of a facilitator/interlocutor in the case of (auto)biographical literature then carries the risk that the

5 This is mentioned by several critics, among others, Bruce-Novoa (1990:116), Fernández Olmo (1981:72) and Steele (1989:321).

interpretation/mediation could result in either falsification or misinterpretation (Fernández Olmo, 1981:72) of facts or even oversimplification. As Elizabeth Meese (1990:102) correctly points out, the interviewer's political stance could tempt him/her to interpret the issues quite differently so that "the 'theorist' mis(re)presents the differences while the 'activist' appropriates them". In the event of cultural differences, a social inferior might even tell the interviewer - as a representative of a dominant culture - what she might want to hear and thus destroy the significance of her own experience. However, it also raises the question of fictionality because any imposition of order or act of selection implies a creative impulse to interpret reality, and makes the reader aware of the narrow margin separating reality and fiction. This would be equally applicable to autobiography but perhaps less overtly than in (auto)biography.

Although the facilitator enables a person from a minority group to voice his/her protest instead of maintaining silence,⁶ Barnet (1986a:299) cautions that he/she must be open-minded about his/her interpretive role and stance in the final integration of material:

Buscamos un propósito mayor que el de documentar una época, queremos injuiciarla y para eso tenemos que tomar posición junto con nuestro informante. Eso no equivale a estar de acuerdo con él, a pensar como él, sino simplemente a asumir lo que él dice, como él ve las cosas.⁷

In the final analysis, Barnet (1986a:300) regards this act as one of engaging in a dialogue with the period while Dorfman (1986:170) regards the task of mediating/editing as a positive contribution to testimonial literature because the facilitator is uninvolved and therefore more critical

6 Here the mediation of Moema Viezzer for Domitila Barrios de Chungara and Elena Poniatowska for Jesusa Palancares can be cited as examples.

7 Translation: Our search is for a greater design/purpose than documenting an epoch, we want to judge/evaluate it and to do so we have to take up position with our informant. This does not amount to agreement with his view, to think like him, but simply to accept what he says, how he sees things.

and able to unite disparate perspectives and fragmented impressions into a meaningful text. The latter argument is endorsed in this study.

The facilitator, on account of her broad experience, perceives a pattern in these recounted events which needs to be explored and elucidated and in so doing, she informs the text with an additional dimension of meaning⁸ not previously apprehended by the subject of the tale - thus creating fiction and irony. For example, Joubert, as an observer/narrator in *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*, establishes connections between seemingly unrelated incidents in Poppie's life which spell oppression without naming it while Elena Poniatowska perceives and explores a feminist stance in *Jesusa*. Thus, both *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* are personal testimonies and politically significant texts because they explore cultural and female exploitation and in the process, expose the underlying power structures at work which turn *Jesusa* and *Poppie* into pawns in the patriarchal/colonialist game.

Elizabeth Meese (1990:100-101) also identifies such a possibility in the case of Rigoberta Menchú when she states that

I understand the production of opposition, the constitution of identity by negation or reversal, but I know that there is always more, some otherness that exceeds the simple projection of opposites.

Meese (1990:100) admits that an attempt to reverse imperialist thought and understand difference might again inhibit the recognition of a certain commonality but she explains her attempt as "the feminist project's desire for writing the other woman - in this case, another version of the relation of the personal to the political" (Meese 1990:101).

In her discussion of the work of the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, Riv-Ellen Prell (Personal Narratives Group, 1989:255) also subscribes to

8 Refer to Meese's (1990:102) description of the "theorist" and the "activist" on p.90.

difference in perspective as a social directive/consideration when she claims that

Myerhoff argued that seeing oneself in the eye of the other is an essential core of human interaction. In her production of life histories, one is aware of the double gaze of both subjects. They were seen, and she was seen. That mutual respect and witnessing were as apparent in her relationships with subjects as in any normative social interaction.

This statement clarifies an important criticism often directed at "translated" experience. Like Poniatowska, Joubert also interviews a historical victim of oppression who is from a different race and culture, a factor which has evoked strong criticism from such a critic as Ampie Coetzee (1979:30). With regard to *Die swerffjare van Poppie Nongena*, he asserts that one person - especially one of the oppressors - mediating for another is presumptuous. However, this opinion is firmly rejected by Margaret Lenta (1984:157) when she avers that

No South African resident would deny the difficulty of achieving sympathetic understanding of a member of another racial group, but to condemn as presumptuous or useless efforts to do so is a despairing verdict on our predicament. It shows too an excessive preoccupation with race, as if it were the only factor which unites or separates people. Elsa Joubert's response to the black woman's narration of her life is that of a woman and a sister. It is significant, I think, that Coetzee's pronoun 'he' ignores the possibility that their shared womanhood could form an important link between the author and her subject.⁹

In similar vein to Meese (1990) and Prell (1989), Joubert (1984:61) claims that despite the loss of the subject's authentic voice, the facilitator could gain valuable insight into the psyche and culture of another person through this kind of writing:

9 This point will be further elaborated in the discussion of the dual perspective in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*.

Writing the book brought me a kind of peace. It meant much to me to get to know the woman Poppie well, to be led into her life, step by step, to be introduced to a world that had been strange to me. I was the richer for it.

Her assertion is significant in several respects: it leads to the promotion of cultural understanding and a broadened perspective; it "breaks the silence" (Lenta, 1984:147) and it implies a bond of sisterhood despite differences in culture and race. In fact, Lucía Guerra-Cunningham (1989b:153) regards it as the task of women from privileged circumstances to initiate

una relación con mujeres de otros grupos sociales expresando una conciencia social en vías de hacer de la población femenina una colectividad históricamente coherente.¹⁰

As Barnett (1986b:313) states so convincingly, "Tenemos que ser la conciencia de nuestra cultura, el alma y la voz de 'los hombres sin historia'".¹¹

Thus, despite their purportedly autobiographical form, contemporary writings by women exhibit a strong element of social critique; an indictment of political and personal oppression. They assume a political character by asserting a certain commonality in female experience which Barry (1989:572) acknowledges and regards as a crucial prerequisite for women's social advancement when she asserts that "Whenever differences are emphasized without first recognizing collectivity, commonality, and unity among women, gender power is depoliticized".

10 Translation: a relationship with women from other social groups expressing a social conscience by making of the feminist population a coherent historical collectivity.

11 Translation: We have to be the conscience of our culture, the spirit and the voice of 'the men without history'.

The significance of testimonial literature as a cultural emanation is emphasized by various critics. Jara (1986:1/3), for instance, clearly perceives the political character/intention of testimonial literature when he refers to it respectively as "una forma de lucha" and "un golpe a las conciencias".¹² He relates Latin American fiction to its historical background and points out its influence in the subversion of existing paradigms of authority (Jara 1986:5) in society. Pérez Pisonero (1988:221) ascribes it with an even broader influence by pointing out how it has affected women's position in society: they have become active protagonists/participants instead of passive readers.

From an historical point of view, testimonial literature also acts as an "equalizer" because it re-evaluates the traditional and attempts to present and preserve the alternative version of history (Ferenández Olmo 1981:74) thus providing access to participation. When, however, testimonial literature is seen as a transitional form, as "una forma de dialéctica de opresor y oprimido"¹³ (Beverley 1987:15), it signifies the essential ambiguity which will crystallize into subtle social indictment in the picaresque novel.

It is this challenge to, or revision of, traditional literature which Rice-Sayre (1986:50) regards as significant in testimonial literature because it defies/counters the facts originally proposed as truth and so obliterates the accepted boundaries separating reality from fiction to extend them "beyond the bounds of creative writing proper". Poniatowska then explores the notion that truth becomes stranger than fiction when she bases her fiction on historical evidence.

12 Translation: a form of struggle and a strike at one's conscience/ a blow to the conscience.

13 Translation: a form of dialectic between the oppressor and the oppressed.

3.2 Poniatowska in context: Oppression and the female perspective

Although Santucci (1988:1) identifies the main themes in Poniatowska's work to be centred on her concern with social justice - the plight of the poor and the oppressed - and the status of women, Poniatowska is also very aware of her own identity as a privileged member of the Mexican community and as a writer/artist. She feels obliged to expose social injustices and to speak for "los que no tienen acceso, no tienen ni voz, los que están siempre silenciados" (Poniatowska, 1981:52).¹⁴ Steele (1988:215) quotes from a paper given by Poniatowska at Wellesley College in which she declares the tragedy of Latin America - and all postcolonial countries for that matter - to be situated in its extreme indifference.

Her profession as a journalist provides her with ready access to documentary material¹⁵ and an opportunity to explore and appreciate the close relationship between history and fiction in Latin America (Mexico). In fact, Poniatowska (1982:56) admits to Méndez-Faith that her work, as "fiction based on reality", is a product of her journalistic background. On being questioned by Roses (Poniatowska 1981:64) as to whether she would ever contemplate a novel of pure fantasy, Poniatowska's reply indicates her rootedness in history as she claims: "la fantasía será a partir de mi persona, que es la reacción mexicana; yo pertenezco a un medio, que es la reacción, la gente reaccionaria".¹⁶

As a reporter and an exponent of documentary or testimonial literature, Poniatowska is aware of the pitfalls of over-simplifying or exploiting the condition of the marginalized. Consequently, her style of interviewing and her rendition of dialogue conform to the ideal of "new journalism", a type of reportage emanating from the United States which attempts to represent

14 Translation: those who do not have access, nor voice, those who are constantly silenced.

15 **Documentary** is used in the sense of a reportage of events without consciously fictionalizing it.

16 Translation: Fantasy would derive from my own person, which is a Mexican reaction, I belong to a milieu which is one of reaction, a reactionary people.

a subjective interpretation of events while striving "to be informative in a socially responsible way" (Young 1983:73). Her awareness of the complexity of society and its interaction with its historical context makes her sensitive to alternate points of view and the realization that an official report inevitably obscures and subsumes personal experience. She therefore attempts to represent the varied texture of society with its disparate aspects of experience and different discourses to avoid the facile trap of reducing differences to binary oppositions. Bruce-Novoa (1990:115) explains this particular feature of her work as follows:

Poniatowska endeavours to avoid misrepresenting the voices she documents by making of her writing not the original personal statement so prized in literary circles but rather a reportage-style medium for the promulgation of materials, such as oral history and political opposition, which are normally omitted from social and literary discourse.

Her varied repertoire consists of original sources of evidence such as photos, documents, reports and personal interviews but Poniatowska also juxtaposes different events from history, resorting to intertextuality, to demonstrate the universal quality of violence and oppression and the complexity of social relationships. In fact, she enters into a dialogue with the past in order to comprehend the present. Like Gordimer, in *A sport of nature*, Poniatowska sees the panorama behind the picture and Janet Gold (1988:183) seems to grasp this very well when she defines Poniatowska's search as being one for "an authenticity that defines a personal as well as an interpersonal truth".

Similar to Allende in her novel *De amor y de sombra*, Poniatowska situates historical events within a fictional framework in order to subvert the validity of official documentation by introducing another version of "reality" and suggesting a story behind the "story". As Martha Robles (1985:352) suggests, Poniatowska "cuestiona, de manera indirecta, por sus temas"¹⁷ and in this way maintains a certain objectivity.

17 Translation: In an indirect way, Poniatowska questions through her themes.

However, Jorgensen (1988b:85) reminds us that an intertextual approach would also require a particular reading strategy which entails sufficient recognition and exploration of the texts alluded to, or the "textos generadores"¹⁸, which broaden the semantic horizon of the intertext. For this purpose it would be convenient to follow Katharine Richards's (1991:107) suggestion to divide her work into two main categories: chronicles and narratives. The chronicles would include specific historical events as recounted by witnesses and interested parties such as *Fuerte es el silencio* and *La noche de Tlatelolco*, while the narrative component, such as *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* and *La "Flor de lis"*, would focus on a narrative strategy as a constructed/fictionalized version of experience.

La noche de Tlatelolco is an example of Poniatowska's documentary work. It constitutes an attempt at re-examining/re-constructing the terrible events and aftermath of the student demonstrations in Mexico City in 1968 under the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz.¹⁹ By collecting the testimonies of various witnesses,²⁰ Poniatowska creates irrefutable evidence which strongly contradicts the official/historic version of the events and serves as "a challenge to a populace [sic] that may be unaware and to a leadership that is deliberately silent" (Starcevik 1982:65).

Poniatowska's stress on the alternative version of history induces Hinds (1976:95) to accuse her of only giving one side of the story. He attributes it to emotional bias resulting from the tragic death of her brother. Yet, he seems to ignore the fact that Poniatowska is not simply writing a documentary but that she is also creating a testimony by denouncing the brutality of the actions of an authoritarian regime. She is speaking for the

18 By this term is implied the total documentation, historical evidence and political events which precipitated the incident.

19 It should also be mentioned here that Poniatowska's 21 year-old brother was killed in this event (Starcevik 1982:63-64).

20 Hinds (1976:94) actually stresses the variety of sources she used to ensure the best possible representation of opinion: "tapes, recollections, speeches, banners, graffiti, newspaper reports and government declarations".

silent suffering masses who are not part of the system but are in opposition to it.

As "testimonial writing", however, originated from the personal accounts of oppression articulated by women, the plight of women consequently occupies an important place in Poniatowska's writing. The testimonial engages in a struggle against oblivion by inscribing memory, a process described by Miriam Balboa Echeverría (1988:369) as

La reconstrucción paso a paso de una situación en la que se niega y reprime la voz de un grupo heredero de la cultura es una acusación legal, testimonial, que permitirá, potencialmente, la regeneración y la reestructuración de un sistema autoritario, censorador, que oprime.²¹

The accusatory tone, or social indictment of testimonial writing is refined in the fictional renditions of oppression by the conscious infusion of irony through the perspective of the facilitator or biographer. Although the political implications become more pertinent, the reader does not feel personally confronted but becomes part of the collective conscience. Poniatowska's work then expresses a subversive quality in the use of mode as well as in the representation of a feminist perspective or, as As Lagos-Pope (1990:253) explains:

Poniatowska utiliza los recursos del testimonio como una estrategia narrativa que le permite articular una crítica radical de la sociedad mexicana en lo que respecta a la condición de la mujer, de manera que el proceso creativo es más complejo de lo que a primera vista pudiera parecer, y sus implicaciones calan más hondo.²²

21 Translation: The step-by-step reconstruction of a situation in which the voice of a hereditary cultural group is denied and repressed, is a legal accusation, a testimony, which will potentially allow the regeneration and reconstruction of an authoritarian, censorious system of oppression.

22 Translation: Poniatowska uses the resources of the testimonial as a narrative strategy which allows her to articulate a radical criticism of Mexican society with respect to the condition of women. As a result, the creative process is

Her exploitation of modes as codes in a social context is illustrated in *Hasta la verte Jesús mío* which features a whole range of modes: it not only illustrates an interesting combination of journalism and testimonial literature, incorporates traits of both the autobiography and the *Bildungsroman* (Kushigian 1987:667)²³ but it also portrays a new kind of *pícaro* deviating from the traditional erotic stereotype (Jaén 1987:23).²⁴ Thus, Poniatowska subverts the official version through both content and form.

3.3 Poniatowska's female protagonists and their subversion of patriarchal domination

Although she might not formally and officially adhere to feminist principles, Poniatowska is acutely aware of the situation of women²⁵ and how their contributions to society are discounted and ignored. In fact, she (Poniatowska 1982:58) claims in an interview with Méndez-Faith that although her work might not bear a distinctive feminist stamp, she will always come to the defence of women. She expresses her disdain for culturally imposed roles on women when she claims, in an interview with Méndez-Faith (Poniatowska 1982:59), that

Todas estas cosas de la condición femenina, de que nosotras somos sumisas y abnegadas, todo eso pues son cosas más impuestas que

more complex than it might appear at first glance and its implications are more profound.

- 23 This opinion is also voiced by Jorgensen (1988a:117) who defines the *Bildungsroman* as a search for identity and self-knowledge and Santucci (1988:105) who notes the "unique ties with biographical and autobiographical writing in the self-characterization of Jesusa".
- 24 By this is meant that Jesusa does not conform to the stereotypical image of the prostitute which usually denotes the *pícaro* in texts such as *Moll Flanders* for example.
- 25 This opinion is also expressed by García Serrano (1991:105) in her discussion of *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*.

reales porque a la hora en que una mujer accede al poder, la mujer actúa igual que el hombre en el poder.²⁶

Her work clearly exposes and subverts male domination in women's lives in various ways. Two of her novels, *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* and *La "flor de lis"*, address the personal relationships between a man and a woman as well as that between mother and daughter. In contrast with *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, the female protagonists in these novels belong to the privileged class of Mexican society and yet Poniatowska manages to evoke poignant resemblances between the oppressed and negated identities of these women from the privileged levels of society and that of a woman from the periphery such as Jesusa. Several critics comment on Poniatowska's ability to identify a common thread of oppression which runs through all the echelons of Mexican society. Both Lagos-Pope (1990:252) and Jorgensen (1988a:122) perceive how the restrictions placed on educated women from privileged social strata correlate with the lack of freedom experienced by women in lower classes.

In a discussion of the epistolary novella, *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela*²⁷, García Serrano (1991:100) points out how Poniatowska subverts textual documentation and historical facts to assert a feminist revisionary account of events:

aquellos procesos escriturales de la novelista que desfiguran, refutan o complementan al documento preexistente, y que son reveladores de la ideología que subyace a la composición de la novela.²⁸

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- 26 Translation: All these issues about the feminine condition, to which we are subjected and denied, all this is more imposed on us than true because when a woman comes to power, a woman acts in the same way as a man coming into power.
- 27 Poniatowska bases her novella on the lives of two historical people: the Russian artist Angelina ("Quiela") Beloff and the Mexican painter Diego Rivera.
- 28 Translation: Those writing processes/techniques of the novelist which distort, refute or complement the pre-existing document, and which reveal the ideology underpinning the novel.

An apparently ordinary collection of love letters²⁹ assumes a different complexion when interpreted by the author: it not only takes the form of an ingenious and subtle condemnation of male arrogance/domination but also asserts female endurance and creativity. As Marcella Paul (1990:2) points out, letters, by their very nature, imply an attempt at engaging in dialogue with an absent person, but Quiela's attempt fails - as her letters are met with silence. Yet, ironically, the very act of expressing her desires enables the narrator to take stock of herself and her life and reconcile herself to her situation (Paul 1990:5). The act of writing then brings self-knowledge and constitutes a healing process. However, at the same time, it exposes an unfeeling and selfish lover and Diego's callous behaviour revealed in the letters is doubly compounded by his silence.

Through the personal note of letters, Poniatowska then addresses several crucial issues of a feminist nature: the most salient point is perhaps the perception that Quiela's identity depends on Rivera and his opinion of her; the second suggestion is that the act of writing, even when it does not result in direct dialogue, constitutes a healing process and brings self-knowledge - analogous to her own creative evolution which can be traced in Quiela; thirdly, the power of silence as a denial of existence is emphasized and finally the text assumes a testimonial character because it reveals a personal interpretation of a relationship usually impersonally reported in biographies, in other words, Poniatowska recounts her version of an official biography. Poniatowska's "revision" of the relationship between Beloff and Rivera then serves as a good example of how a review of events from another perspective can imbue a work with a different and transcendental quality. As García Serrano (1991:104) notes, Quiela's problem assumes a universal dimension from Poniatowska's perspective so

29 Nina Scott (1992:414) explains the historical background as follows:

The text is based on the historical relationship between Diego Rivera and the Russian painter Angelina Beloff, six years his senior. They met in Bruges in 1909, fell in love and moved to Paris; in 1916 they had a son who died in infancy. One year after their son's death Rivera abandoned Angelina to live with another Russian painter, a union which produced a daughter, and in 1921 left Beloff definitively when he returned to Mexico.

that it becomes applicable not only to Poniatowska herself but also to the female artist and novelist as such.

Quiela also serves as an example of the self-effacing woman whose identity is defined by her male partner. Scott (1992:415) in fact, likens her to the "fragmented cubist portraits" that Rivera had created of her. And yet Quiela survives and finds healing in the writing process which gives her perspective, insight and self-esteem which had previously been lacking. Poniatowska then seems to insinuate that a relationship could only be successful if the partners complemented each other and are not parasitic or dependent on each other for identity.

In her last novel, *La "flor de lis"*, Poniatowska also appropriates intertextuality as a subversive strategy. The text conforms to a type of *Bildungsroman* which Lemaître (1990/91:28) suggests can be seen as a parody of Marivaux's *La vie de Marianne*. Poniatowska sketches the difficulties of a noble emigrant family to settle in Mexico and the gradual sexual and political awakening of the young protagonist, Mariana. In this text, Poniatowska broaches both the questions of personal and political/national identity by exploring Mariana's situation within the Mexican social scene. Lemaître (1990-91:36) remarks that this self-critical exercise liberates the protagonist and enables her to come to terms with her own reality similar to her exploration of the artistic image in *Querido Diego te abraza Quiela* - another example of how writing provides the means to self-knowledge.

The family adapts with difficulty to everyday Mexican revolutionary society because they attempt to artificially perpetuate their former privileges in a strange country with different norms. Lemaître (1990/91) perceives this as an effective illustration of the impracticality and one-sidedness of imposing an inherited system of education on a working class people with different needs:

La novela es, si se la sabe leer, un implacable enjuiciamiento de la educación extranjerizante y pseudo-aristocrática que recibían y siguen recibiendo los jóvenes adinerados de nuestras grandes

metrópolis y sobre todo de la educación que le es reservada a las mujer[es].³⁰

The dialectic between reality and fiction is also accentuated by the autobiographical facts which correlate with Poniatowska's own life. The factual appears fictional and the fictional character of Padre Teufel assumes realistic proportions (Lemaître 1990/91:28).

An awareness of marginalization and oppression in the personal sphere is depicted through accounts from Mariana's childhood. Her life is mainly shaped and dominated by her mother's indifference, her father's absence and weakness of character and Father Teufel's potent influence over her (Steele, 1989:316) - almost replacing her parental affiliations. In *Flor de lis* Poniatowska also illustrates how such a patriarchal society distorts the mother and daughter relationship (Jorgensen 1988b:119). The mother is an elusive figure who becomes both a source of frustration and obsession to Mariana until she transfers her adoration to Father Teufel, the activist, who makes Mariana aware of how artificial and stilted her lifestyle is in comparison with the lives of ordinary people. The mother's neglect of Mariana is reflected in Mariana's perceptions of her own identity and sense of security.

Ironically, it is the neglect of their parents and the care of the servants that cause Mariana and her sister Mónica to become aware of social disparities and develop a social conscience (Steele 1989:314). However, all women - from both sides of the social spectrum - are not liberated from male domination. Steele (1989:302) perceives a "female complicity against patriarchy, across barriers of class and race" between the sisters and the servants.

30 Translation: The novel is, if you know how to read it, an implacable indictment of foreign practices and pseudo-aristocratic education which the young rich people of our large metropolis receive and continue to receive and especially the education which is reserved for women.

Father Teufel exemplifies the shallowness of his religious conviction when he is given the opportunity to exercise and abuse his spiritual and masculine powers. He seems to fulfil the same role as Bonaparte Blenkins in *The story of an African farm* - an imposter hiding under the cloak of a religious man. He abuses his authority and consequently appears as "the patriarch masquerading as social messiah" (Steele 1989:318) Lemaître (1990/91:35) points out that the situational satire of Padre Teufel is lost to the members of the small community because

persisten en confundir al monje con su hábito más allá de toda lógica y a pesar de los insultos de que son víctimas por parte del sacerdote, realzando así la máscara de inautenticidad detrás de la cual se desarrolla la verdadera ficción del relato, la de sus vidas".³¹

This is another indication of the official story which obscures the personal one. From the two novels discussed, *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* and *La "flor de lis"*, it becomes clear that women are all subjected to domination and isolation. Despite the fact that they might perhaps experience better economic conditions, they are still refused public recognition as equals. The signs of female oppression identified in these texts will be further exemplified in the quasi-picaresque qualities of Jesusa Palancares. Like Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Jesusa, who originates from the margins of society, assumes the burden of womanhood as it is manifested in the Mexican context. Lagos-Pope (1990:252) claims that Jesusa provides Poniatowska with a common denominator or a "máscara para expresar la realidad de la condición de la mujer, ya que también la mujer de los estratos altos y profesionales ha estado sujeta a muchas limitaciones".³²

31 Translation: They persist in confusing the monk with his habit above all logic and despite their being victims of his insults and in this way they reinforce the false mask behind which the true story of the tale is being performed, that of their lives.

32 Translation: a mask to express the reality of the female condition, because even women from privileged and professional positions have been subjected to many limitations.

With Jesusa as focalizer, Poniatowska can address the social issues of Mexico with more confidence than in her capacity as a member of the privileged class³³ and thus pay tribute to "tantas mujeres que hacen la historia de mi país, México, y que México no acoge sino margina"³⁴ (Poniatowska 1989:9). The testimonial as a mode then performs a certain function of social critique which becomes more pertinent in the picaresque.

3.4 *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*: a testimony to female assertion

3.4.1 *Jesusa's role as protagonist*

In discussing her reportage style in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, Poniatowska (1985:158) concedes that her real life interviewee was stubborn and uncommunicative - suspicious, in fact. Poniatowska was therefore forced, in some measure to edit and interpret³⁵ Jesusa's experience (Steele 1988:211). Although Poniatowska's main motivation in writing the text of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* would have been to allow Jesusa to speak out, she was also attracted by her independent spirit and developed a tremendous admiration for her. Consequently, Jesusa's case study had a tremendous influence on her writing, as Poniatowska (1981:61) openly admits to her interviewer, Lorraine Roses.

Jesusa's situation made the author aware of the fate of the poor in Mexico, awoke her to political reality and empowered her to take up the cause for human justice. Although she realized that her writing might not change the situation, it could still denounce it publicly (Poniatowska 1981:62; Poniatowska 1982:58). Yet, by attempting to understand Jesusa - regardless of the initial motive - Poniatowska has found a way of coming

33 Poniatowska was born in France of aristocratic parents and lived a privileged life in Mexico where her knowledge of ordinary life was based on servants' talk (Lagos-Pope 1990:249).

34 Translation: the many women who constitute the history of my country, Mexico, and which Mexico does not acknowledge but marginalizes.

35 See the description of (auto)biographical literature in Chapter 2

close to the essence of Mexico, of gaining some understanding of marginalized people. A situation which Cynthia Steele (1988:213) perceives as:

una relación dialéctica en la cual ella le presta su voz de escritora, su acceso a las revistas y a las casas editoriales, al alguien que está marginada de las estructuras del poder.³⁶

Through dialogue, two women from opposing spheres of society, the privileged and the marginalized, then define their individual identities by creating a discourse of similarity in difference - similar as women subjected to an oppressive society but different in class and culture. Steele (1989:298) stresses the significance of such a confluence of experience when she concludes:

Thus, both in fiction and history, female solidarity across lines of class and ethnicity at times paradoxically has grown out of a common experience - from opposite ends of the power dialectic - of female exploitation.

Jesusa's situation has a tremendous impact on Poniatowska's development as a woman and an artist and she perceives the necessity for Jesusa to break the silence of her doubly marginalized existence - as a woman and a member of a marginalized society (workers). Consequently, she provides Jesusa with a means of restoring her faith in herself as a person/individual whose experience merits attention and, to make a political statement for women and minorities as a member of society. In this reciprocal relationship, Poniatowska's role must not be seen as patronizing but as an act of acknowledgement, an act of learning the other side of the coin of experience - a process of interaction. Seen from this perspective, the question of authenticity/veracity assumes a different dimension because it

36 Translation: It concerns a dialectic situation in which she lends her authorial voice and her access to periodicals and publishers, to someone who is marginalized by power structures.

is the lesson learnt and the intention that count and not the detail recounted. As Saltz comments (1988:233):

El propósito de Poniatowska al escribir la novela no puede ser otro que dar una representación de una mujer de la clase obrera, representación cuyo valor radica justamente en que no puede reproducirla con exactitud.³⁷

Like Joubert, in *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena*, Poniatowska assumes a position of ordering events - discerning a pattern - of fictionalizing and, perhaps because of her vast experience and literacy, attributing more meaning to Jesusa's life than she would have done herself. Jesusa becomes aware that most women seem to suffer from some kind of oppression but that it is not a pre-ordained situation and that they are entitled to be free. However, in her naive way she believes that to avoid men is the easiest way of avoiding evil. Therefore, in all her simplicity, she portrays the feeling of hopelessness experienced by many women but especially by the socially deprived section of the population. Yet, the mature Jesusa's attempts at explaining her behaviour, at self-analysis, provide an interesting perspective on her experience (Poniatowska 1984:273) and provide her with an identity and individual personality. Various critics (among them Fernández Olmo 1981:72; Jorgensen 1988a:112) comment on Jesusa's nonconformity to the image of the female stereotype usually represented in literature - in fact she inclines towards the anti-heroine - so that Hancock (1983:353) regards her as "a step toward the delineation of a new female image or role model" because her "life, attitudes, and expression invalidate the erroneous and offensive stereotypes of women that have been perpetuated" (Hancock 1983:357).

Rather than displaying traits of submission and passivity she shows preference for masculine characteristics intimating a more androgynous

37 Translation: Poniatowska's intention in writing the novel can only be to represent a women from the working class, a representation whose value is situated in exactly the fact that it cannot be reproduced exactly.

attitude (Hancock 1983:353). Jesusa openly expresses her pro-male attitude by saying that

Para todas las mujeres sería mejor ser hombre, seguro, porque es más divertido, es uno más libre y nadie se burla de uno. En cambio de mujer, a ninguna edad la pueden respetar, porque si es muchacha se la vacilan y si es vieja la chotean, sirve de risión porque ya no sopla. En cambio, el hombre vestido de hombre va y viene: se va y no viene y como es hombre ni quien le pare el alto. Mil veces mejor ser hombre que mujer! (Hasta:181).^{38 39}

As she had been very close to her mother, her death had created a watershed in Jesusa's life. Her anguish at the loss of her mother is illustrated in her account of the funeral when, in her desperate attempt to reach out to her mother by jumping into the grave, she is almost buried with the corpse. Her sorrow is such that she refuses to come out: "Yo no me quería salir. Quería que me taparan allí con mi mamá" (Hasta:19).⁴⁰ After her mother's death Jesusa attaches herself to her father, she accepts him as her role model and guards him jealously. She resents his affairs with women and openly admits to manipulating him when she states that "Mi papá hacía lo que yo quería" (Hasta:23).⁴¹

The most important admission that Jesusa makes about her childhood is that she never played again like a child after her mother's death because

38 Translation: It would surely be better for all women to be men, because it is more entertaining, you are more free and nobody ridicules you. A woman is not respected at any age, because when she is a girl they tease her and when she is old they make fun of her, thus she serves as laughing stock because she is no longer with it. A man dressed as a man comes and goes: he goes and doesn't come and because he is a man nobody stops him. It is a thousand times better to be a man than a woman!

39 Hasta refers to: Poniatowska, Elena. 1984. *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

40 Translation: I did not want to come out. I wanted them to cover me there with my mother.

41 Translation: My father did what I wanted.

she assumed the responsibilities of the woman of the house (*Hasta*:22). The experience of her childhood then accounts for Jesusa's ambivalence about the sexes. The fact that Jesusa grows up without a mother and that she identifies with her father is regarded by Lemaître (1985:755) as a major factor in her development and her sense of independence and freedom and she maintains that "La identificación de Jesusa con su padre y, por extensión, con el ideal masculino de su cultura, clase social y circunstancia histórica, se traduce en una desvalorización de las diferencias biológicas entre hombre y mujer".⁴² Her adherence to the male model is also influenced by her unfortunate experiences with her various stepmothers, her father's other female companions and her sister's suffering. All of these relationships pose a threat to Jesusa in some way: either in the form of physical abuse or by robbing her of her father's attention.

Yet, her endurance of physical abuse seems uncharacteristic of her independent spirit and it could only be explained by her fatalistic belief that she deserves to be punished. This is illustrated in her passivity towards her stepmother's abuse which she relates in a noncommittal way:

Ella me golpeaba pero yo no decía nada porque como ya estaba más grande comprendía mejor. ...Y esta señora se dedicó a enseñarme a hacer quehacer; me pegó mucho con una vara de membrillo, sí, pero lo hacía por mi bien, para que yo me encarrerara (*Hasta*:38).⁴³

This attitude of resignation to the weakness of her sex remains with Jesusa and determines her strong faith in reincarnation later in life which is supposed to compensate for her sins. It is also a good indication of how culture shapes and conditions gender roles which Jesusa, despite her independent spirit, could not escape entirely. Pérez Pisonero (1988:222)

42 Translation: Jesusa's identification with her father, and even more with the masculine ideal of her culture, social class and historical circumstances, is translated to diminish biological differences between men and women.

43 Translation: She used to beat me but I didn't say anything because I was already much older and I understood better...And this lady dedicated herself to teach me to keep busy; she often beat me with a switch, yes, but she did it for my own good so that I could keep on the right track.

notes the theme of disillusionment portrayed by Jesusa when he refers to her belief in reincarnation:

el mundo es para Jesusa etapa de prueba y purgatorio, particularmente para la mujer, que purga y sufre en carne propia el dolor que como hombre causó en previas reincarnaciones a otras mujeres.⁴⁴

Comforted by this belief, Jesusa can attempt to understand her many trials and tribulations. She accepts it as her fate that women are destined to suffer. As Saltz (1988:234) notes, her laconic tone expresses her personal alienation and lack of faith in herself. Her whole life constitutes the conflict she experiences between discovering a personal identity and attaining some measure of social independence and recognition. She finds comfort in her faith and claims that God had created a clean human being but because of his/her sins man/woman has to return to this earth to clean his soul "a fuerza de dolor y de sufrimiento".⁴⁵ Elsa Joubert's Poppie Nongena shows this same stoic endurance in her fight for survival. Like Celestina and Moll Flanders, Jesusa realizes that money and sex are predominant in a social scale of values and that "la mujer, relegada de las fuentes de la economía por todo un largo proceso histórico, se verá obligada a canjear sexo por dinero" (Pérez Pisonero 1988:223)⁴⁶ if she wants to survive. Therefore it seems logical to Jesusa that by denying her femininity and assuming masculine traits she will be able to survive without resorting to prostitution or compulsory service to her husband (Pérez Pisonero 1988:223).

Jesusa is an intriguing mixture of old and new: as a woman she insists on independence and self-sufficiency, which are qualities foreign to the

44 Translation: for Jesusa the world is a stage of trial and purgatory, especially for the woman, who is purged and suffers the pain in her own flesh that she had caused to other women as a man in previous lives.

45 Translation: by force of pain and suffering.

46 Translation: Woman, kept away from the sources of the economy during a long period of history, found herself obliged to exchange sex for money.

traditional concept of woman, and yet, she illustrates the traditional quality of endurance and resents signs of change as Poniatowska (1989a:17) points out :

Jesusa despotricaba contra la "modernidad", las costumbres de hoy, las canciones que se oyen en el radio, la comida congelada, el pescado refrigerado, los llamados adelantos.⁴⁷

Yet, I would suggest that Jesusa's common sense stands her in good stead in judging people and that she does not allow prejudice to cloud her vision. She is first and foremost a pragmatist and her non-conformist attitude is perhaps best exemplified in her stance on homosexuality. She regards homosexuals as sincere in their approach to life, shows a surprising lack of prejudice and claims that they are better men: "porque los afeminados son más buenos que los machos. Como que su desgracia de ser mitad hombre y mitad mujer los hace mejores" (*Hasta*:181).⁴⁸ Pérez Pisonero (1988:228) interprets Jesusa's relationship with homosexuals as an attempt by Poniatowska to restore the social imbalance which he maintains is rooted in culture.

Yet, despite her fatalistic attitude, Jesusa does not indulge in self pity. She gives her views about unhappiness by claiming that

Los tristes son malas gentes que no se acuerdan más que de sus pesares. Yo nunca le dije que fuera triste, le dije que era triste la vida que he llevado, pero yo, no. La vida sí, la vida sí es pesada, pero ¿yo triste? A mí me gusta mucho cantar a grito abierto (*Hasta*:285).⁴⁹

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- 47 Translation: Jesusa raved about "modernity", the present-day customs, the songs heard on the radio, frozen food, refrigerated fish, the calls of progress.
- 48 Translation: because the effeminate ones are much more agreeable than the *macho* ones. The disgrace of being half man and half woman makes them better.
- 49 Translation: Sad people are bad because they only remember their problems. I never said that I was sad but that I had led a sad life. But, I, never. Life, yes life is difficult, but me, sad? I like to sing with a loud voice/scream.

Mainly due to her illiteracy and peasant background, Jesusa is poverty stricken and moves on the periphery of society. Constrained by her plight, she leads an itinerant/peripatetic existence which is further exacerbated by political unrest and authoritarian regimes. However, because she has a naturally inquisitive mind, she enjoys her peregrinations and seems to regard them as a kind of adventure school when she admits that

Y entre todos mis familiares también , sólo yo fui la ambulante, la caminanta, la que ha ido a todas partes. Porque escrito está que tenía que andar mucho (*Hasta*:303).⁵⁰

The trajectory of Jesusa's life shows how an independent spirit refuses to bow to culturally imposed conventions which are without justification. In contrast, Poppie also shows courage but she offers silent resistance and never considers articulating her objections. She does not question the harsh political system which marginalizes her and drives her away from her husband but relates events in a resigned way (*Poppie*:114)⁵¹

Although Poppie is represented as an individual with potential for love and caring, she is also typical (Lenta 1984:151) through suffering the same hardships as the rest of her race and gender. She also represents the woman-centred culture (Lenta 1984:149) which seems to have developed in post-colonial countries where colonial powers have debilitated indigenous/black male authority and responsibility has shifted to the women. The latter display an inordinate amount of courage and endurance against the onslaughts of adversity. This quality is evident in both Poppie's and Jesusa's stoic and silent endurance in the face of various forms of oppression.

49 Translation: Yet, among all my acquaintances I was the only one to wander, the one who has been everywhere. Because it was written that I would travel a lot.

51 *Poppie* refers to: Joubert, Elsa. 1978. *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg.

Jesusa's story relates how society abuses power and marginalizes women and minorities but, as Lemaître (1985:763) observes, Jesusa is not only a product of her society and her class, she is much more - she represents the spirit of change and conforms to the image of the *pícaro*. Educated in the harsh school of life, she obtains first-hand knowledge of different spheres of society and has to learn how to survive in a hostile environment. This aspect of her life is the more remarkable because she receives no encouragement to react against the norms of established traditional female behaviour. In fact, her social position seems hopeless with regard to personal and social improvement. Yet, Jesusa learns to survive and develops a strong dislike for any kind of abuse whether in personal or political spheres/relationships.

As a daughter and wife she is exposed to every kind of abuse from authoritarian males and consequently harbours no illusions about men. Hence her scathing denunciation of the male sex and its hypocritical attitude in all spheres of society. As far as social institutions and authorities are concerned, Jesusa also has very definite ideas. She certainly does not regard marriage as a solution when she disdainfully states that "Pero tú sigues de tonta porque si te da mala vida, todavía te comprometes más con el matrimonio" (*Hasta*:261).⁵² She harbours no delusions about the clergy and roundly denounces them for hypocrites when she declares that

Cuando están celebrando la misa, todavía, porque en ese instante cumplen con su misión, pero pasando la misa para mí ya no son más que hombres materiales, como todos los de la calle con todos sus defectos y hasta más, porque andan hambrientos de mujer (*Hasta*:203).⁵³

52 Translation: You are foolish, because if he gives you a hard time, you would compromise yourself even more with marriage.

53 Translation: Not when they are celebrating mass, because then they are fulfilling their mission, but when mass is over they are no more than ordinary men to me, like all those on the street with all their defects and even more, because they are hungry for women.

The government is also accused of "puro bandidaje" [pure banditry] (*Hasta*:261). Hancock (1983:356) asserts that "The combination of Jesusa's distaste for men and her strong craving for absolute independence are primary factors which determine her views on certain accepted social institutions and conditions". Yet, I believe that Jesusa is more opposed to the abuse of power, which she associates with men, than to men as such.

Jesusa experiences very little affection, both from her father and her husband and this situation is perpetuated in her unwilling marriage to Pedro Aguilar. It was simply decided for her, as she relates with resignation: "Como no se me concedió irme, forzosamente el oficial se casó conmigo, pero no por mi voluntad. ¿Qué les interesa a los soldados el consentimiento de una mujer? Quisiera uno o no quisiera" (*Hasta*:82).⁵⁴ Her individuality is ignored and she becomes a mere possession to be abused at will. As Pérez Pisonero (1988:224) remarks, Jesusa at first follows the road of most women by not resisting her husband's maltreatment and consequently opting "por el camino de la autodestrucción y la degradación" [for the road of self-destruction and degradation]. However, when she is sufficiently provoked she retaliates in kind - she threatens Pedro with a pistol - and her success makes her realize that she need never submit to victimization again. She has broken the stereotypical image of the suffering, passive Mexican woman (Lemaître 1985:751) imposed by society and has challenged male authority. In fact, she has effected a role reversal so that Lemaître (1985:759) astutely observes, "La adopción del modelo masculino tradicional le sirve a Jesusa para sobrevivir en un mundo creado a imagen y semejanza del hombre".⁵⁵

Because of her attitude of self-sufficiency, Jesusa distrusts love as an emotion and admits that it is a foreign concept to her: "Por eso no reconozco cuál es el amor, nunca tuve amor, ni sentí nada, ni Pedro

54 Translation: As I was not allowed to leave, the official forced me to marry him, without my consent. What did soldiers care about a woman's consent? Whether one likes it or not.

55 Translation: Adopting the traditional male role model helps Jesusa to survive in a world created in the image of and similar to man.

tampoco" (*Hasta*:106).⁵⁶ However, her words seem to belie her actions because she maintains her contact with Poniatowska, which illustrates an innate need for recognition and affection.

Lagos-Pope (1990:250-251) is quite clear about Poniatowska's indictment of the patriarchal and class systems and she points out that despite Jesusa's apparent difference from the general women of her class she also exhibits, to a large extent, the feelings of impotence and frustration experienced by most women and the result is that Jorgensen (1988:114) notes how "sus reacciones a los límites impuestos en su libertad fluctúa entre el desafío abierto y la sumisión callada".⁵⁷

Her rebellious nature emerges in her old age when she consciously breaks the silence to testify about her life. Saltz (1988:233) correctly intimates that "la manifestación del habla se puede ver como índice del poder social".⁵⁸ Consequently, her rebellion assumes a new dimension as former acts of defiance are replaced by a testimony of her life which also represents a collective testimony to oppression. As Saltz (1988:235) observes:

Jesusa, la niña y la mujer brava que no habla, se convierte en la vieja Jesusa que testimonia un pleito fuerte ante la grabadora de Poniatowska. Jesusa se hace testigo de la vida.⁵⁹

Thus Jesusa is empowered by speaking, by having a voice.

56 Translation: Therefore I don't ever recognize love, I never had it or experienced it, not even for Pedro.

57 Translation: her reaction to the limits imposed on her liberty fluctuates between open defiance and silent submission.

58 Translation: The manifestation of speech can be seen as an indication of social power.

59 Translation: Jesusa, the courageous girl and woman who does not speak, is transformed into the old Jesusa who testifies in a strong debate before Poniatowska's tape recorder. Jesusa becomes a witness for life.

Perhaps the main root of Jesusa's rebellious spirit could be found in her innate pride. Poniatowska (1981/82:61) admits to Roses in an interview that Jesusa remains proud and independent unto death. In fact Jesusa herself claims that she wants to die without help or an audience when she says "Tengo muchas ganas de irme a morir por allá donde anduve de errante. Que Dios se acuerde de mí porque yo quisiera quedarme debajo de un árbol por allá lejos!...porque la mayoría de la gente viene a reírse del que está agonizando" (*Hasta*:303).⁶⁰

Jesusa's experience elicits conflicting interpretations so that some critics may regard her as independent while others regard her as a victim. Yet, as Jorgensen (1988a:112) points out, it is exactly this tension between new and traditional values which constitutes the significance of the text. In fact it is the concept of change which Hancock (1983:354) identifies as a recurrent motif in the text, that is both criticized and exemplified by Jesusa. She is a rebel without being a revolutionary because she resists oppression in all forms which might curb her personal freedom and yet she is forced to conform to social values.

In character and attitude, Jesusa is strongly reminiscent of the picaresque. It is especially exemplified in her cynicism and exposé of social corruption as Hancock (1983:354) indicates when he refers to the picaresque character of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*:

In addition to such topics as hunger and general misfortune, the novel has functions that are typical of the picaresque tradition. Most important, perhaps, is the criticism, implied or stated, in many of Jesusa's observations and judgments of social, economic, and political situations which she experiences.

Her peripheral and peripatetic existence also exemplifies an essential picaresque vein in the text. Yet, the one trait which does not conform to

60 Translation: I would like to go and die where I had wandered. O, that God would take pity on me because I would like to remain under a far away tree...because most people come to laugh at the one suffering the agony.

the picaresque character of personal selfishness is Jesusa's covert yet real compassion for animals and children because of their vulnerability. She compares Rufino, a young boy that she met in the street and adopted, to a dog without a master (*Hasta*:233). This metaphor is significant when seen in the context of Jesusa's affection for her dog, Amarillo, that had attached itself to her (*Hasta*:177).

Although the picaresque features such as the peripatetic life style, lack of emotional attachments, social marginalization and oppression are very apparent in the text and Jesusa criticizes society, she lacks the distinctive quality of self-irony which is present in Lazarillo. This element is only generated by the facilitator and reader. Jesusa is acerbic and keen in her observations of social institutions like the clergy but she does not realize the ironical implications of her situation. For example, when she recounts the progress of the war she notes the hypocrisy of the motives for fighting but she accepts it as normal when she says that

Así fue la revolución, que ahora soy de éstos, pero mañana seré de los otros, a chaquetazo limpio, el caso es estar con el más fuerte, el que tiene más parque ... También ahora es así.⁶¹

Thus, her prosaic tone and the disparity between her situation and that of society - of which she is ultimately a part - induces irony. Yet, she does not realize the full impact of her words or grasp the rules of the game, like Lazarillo, Hillela and Eva, who consciously set out to subvert the *status quo* and gain from it. It remains for the reader to note this disparity and interpret its significance.

This attitude is also prevalent in Poppie in the eponymous novel. Consequently, Poppie's unawareness of the irony of her situation devoids the text of any propagandistic tone. Margaret Lenta (1984:152) points out that Poppie never reverts to analytical reflection but rather relies on

61 Translation: Such was the revolution, that today I support (belong to) those but tomorrow I shall support others, to keep a clean jacket it is important to support the strongest, the one who has the most ammunition. Even today it is still like that.

sensory experience. It is left to the reader to make the necessary ironical connections and Lenta (1984:153) suggests:

Poppie, however, not only does not relate her experience to the whole social context, but she does not really protest; she cannot, since to do so would be to be possessed of the concepts needed to judge a system which deals unfairly with her. The reader therefore must register that what she suffers is appallingly unjust and must articulate her protest for her.

Saltz (1988:237) points out that there is a decided correlation between Jesusa's wanderings and her testimony. Her peripatetic existence is a means of escape from her miserable existence and also a means of survival, and the more sedentary she becomes the more eloquent she becomes. Thus talking provides the outlet usually provided by action and correlates with the diminishing picaresque character of the text: it is told by a now resident member of society, no longer a wanderer. However, this conclusion is not valid because in the first place, Jesusa is still an outcast and in the second place, the ironic stance of the *pícaro/a* is situated in the fact that she/he, in the case of Lazarillo, has joined society at its own game of hypocrisy.

Hasta no verte Jesús mío could therefore serve as an individual woman's testimony to oppression which is enhanced by picaresque qualities. Although Jesusa is a character in her own right, she also becomes a symbol of the oppressed uneducated woman who is abused by society - somewhat similar to Tess of the D'Urbervilles - and who initiates the first step towards female emancipation. Similar to Tess, she resorts to spiritual escape but she also believes in reincarnation (Lemaître 1985:762) and in visions and superstitions. However, where Tess exhibits passivity as a virtue, Jesusa refuses to be dominated and Lemaître (1985:752) observes that this is her first step towards liberation. Poniatowska (1989:9) herself not only summarizes Jesusa's life but also pays her the most touching tribute when she claims that she

Murió igual a sí misma: brava, soberbia, rabiosa, inconforme, desencantada

.....
Toda su vida fue de exigencia. Como creía en la reencarnación, pensó que esta vez había venido al mundo a pagar deudas por su mal comportamiento en vidas anteriores.⁶²

Poppie does not conform to the picaresque mainly because of her sense of loyalty and loving family relationships. Her life is disrupted but not episodic in the sense of Jesusa's and she displays no open social criticism apart from questioning personal adversity.

3.4.2 *The retrospective stance and "open" ending*

Hasta no verte Jesús mío could then be accommodated under any of the following modes: (auto)biography, the picaresque and/or testimonial literature. However, due to its strong referential quality, the existence of the protagonist as an historical person and the lack of an ironic stance, it would be more appropriate to classify it as testimonial in character. Whereas the conventional *pícaro* launches a subtle indictment of society, Jesusa is inclined to apportion the blame for her situation to herself rather than society. Jorgensen (1988a:113) notes that "el dilema a saber interpretar a Jesusa Palancares como una construcción literaria se descubre en la tensión entre sus opiniones críticas de la sociedad mexicana y su actitud, también crítica, hacia sí misma".⁶³ It is Poniatowska who sees the events in a larger perspective and can identify the root of the problem. Consequently, Jesusa lacks the innovative strategy to reverse the blame which is so typical of the *pícaro*.

62 Translation: She died true to herself; brave, proud, fierce, disagreeable and disillusioned ... All her life she was in need. Because she believed in reincarnation, she thought that this time she had come to the world to pay her debts for bad behaviour in previous lives.

63 Translation: The dilemma in knowing how to interpret Jesusa Palancares as a literary construction is situated in the tension between her critical opinions of Mexican society and her critical attitude towards herself.

The two most important strategies of testimonial and picaresque literature are used in modified forms in the text: the first person retrospective stance and the concomitant open ending. Although Poniatowska acts as facilitator, Jesusa acts as the focalizer in the text and her death at the end has no finality because it only implies another phase of reincarnation and consequently, implies an open ending.

Poniatowska renders a unique blend of fact and fiction because reportage, although through a first person focalizer, inevitably includes a reconstructed account of events in retrospect. However, she reduces this "fictionalization of experience" effectively by representing Jesusa as the narrator/focalizer because as author, she is constantly aware of the possibility of speaking for someone, of her/the author's intrusion. Scott (1992:413) maintains that the vitality of Jesusa's language serves as a testimony of Poniatowska's skill as an interviewer because her account is essentially given in monologue. However, she indicates that she has changed the reportage in several respects which refers us back to the thorny question of fictionality and documentation.

Jorgensen (1988a:110) avers that the manipulation of narrative perspective constitutes one of the most effective devices in Poniatowska's work because the first person narration and personal element presume authority and give credence to female experience. In several of Poniatowska's novels - *Querido Diego*, *Flor de lis* and *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* - the female protagonists can also be identified as the main focalizers and narrators. However, the apparent similarity in identity between focalizer and narrator is deceptive because they are separated by time, space and function (Jorgensen 1988a:111). Consequently, this ambivalent relationship - both the same and different - results in a reading in which "este juego del yo narrador consigo mismo revela que yo soy yo, y soy otro en un continuo despliegue de múltiples perspectivas narrativas" (Jorgensen 1988a:111).⁶⁴

64. Translation: This game of the narrator with himself reveals that I am I and the other, in a continual unfolding of multiple narrative perspectives.

The narrator and facilitator in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* are both distanced from events and are both involved in reconstructing a life, so that, as Saltz (1988:237) suggests, the events of Jesusa's life should be seen as separate from her and Poniatowska's respective interpretations. The mature Jesusa's interpretation of her childhood, when she was a completely different person lacking experience, is influenced by her present position. Jesusa is aware of this discrepancy and actually comments on it when she refers to her youthful ignorance: "Estaba yo muy chica, no comprendía. Cuando uno es chica no comprende nada. Se le afigura que la luna es queso, que todo el monte es de orégano" (*Hasta*:168).⁶⁵ This remark, from her present peripheral position, acquires a certain ironic connotation because from Poniatowska's perspective Jesusa still knows very little. Poniatowska's intrusion as author is then evident in the structural/formal presentation of events - juxtapositioned or contrasted - which evokes the inherent irony of the political position of the marginalized. It emerges from the discrepancy between Jesusa's naive account of events and the actual state of affairs as grasped by the facilitator and reader.

The difference in critical attitude corresponds to the temporal differences between the subject recollecting and the subject being recollected. Jorgensen (1988a:117) explains this dual perspective as a manifestation of the discrepancy or dialectic between present and past; I and other; liberty and conformity. She (Jorgensen 1988a:115) points out that Jesusa the character blames her husband for her misfortunes while Jesusa the narrator also admits to self-criticism. This dialectic illustrates the conflict between individual and society which evolves into mature acceptance (Jorgensen 1988a:113)

Scott (1992:414) contends that the ambiguity produced by disparate voices - the authentic one and that of the facilitator - "undermines the effectiveness of Jesusa's testimonial". However, viewed from a literary perspective, it merely accentuates two different reconstructions of reality:

65 Translation: I was a small little girl who didn't understand anything. When one is small one understands very little/nothing. One assumes that the moon is made of cheese and that the whole mountain consists of origanum.

for as much as Jesusa is recalling her past, Poniatowska is giving it form - a task which the reader will in turn attempt to interpret and assess. In other words, a fragmented existence has been moulded into a testimony confronting the reader and elicits his/her participation and reaction. It is only through the act of writing, of identifying a pattern behind the experience that the ironic implications become evident.

Irony is further emphasized by the apparent simplicity/innocence of the protagonist who remains largely unaware of the ironic implications of her condition. Bruce-Novoa (1990:118) points out that in

Poniatowska's shifts to first-person narratives in which women speak directly, the problem shifts as well: one must distinguish between the apparently sincere text of the narrator, who to some extent incarnates the ideologemes of the dominant culture, and the ironic subtext of the feminist author, who infiltrates the character's monologue to subvert it and, in the end, transform it into a dialogical space.

Hereby, Bruce-Novoa (1990:118/121) clearly identifies a subtext which implies a "palimpsestic" reading in contrast with a reading "with patriarchal expectations". This intertextual quality of her narrative fiction has alternatively also been described by Scott (1992:411) as "a multiplicity of juxtaposed voices, a kind of textual collage".

The social critique voiced in this text directly implicates society and its role in the marginalization process. It is ironical that an outsider has to make use of devious means in order to obtain social entry and follow the rules. This is directly related to the open ending which is so characteristic of the picaresque novel where the *pícaro/a* gives a retrospective account of his/her life but usually from an ostensibly socially acceptable position. In Jesusa's case she was more settled than before because she had kept her job as a washerwoman for some time.

The use of irony in autobiographical writing - as well as testimonial writing and the picaresque - is particularly appropriate in relation to the open

ending. Jara (1986:3) points out the relevance of this technique as a directive or corrective for the present when he maintains that

los testimonios, en su significación más elemental y básica, son la evidencia de una historia que se continúa. Al mismo tiempo lo que el testimonio comunica no es sólo una evidencia del pasado sino también una manera diferente de vivir el ahora.⁶⁶

As an example of first person retrospective narration, the testimonial corresponds to the picaresque in structure, shares the same ambivalence between focalizer and narrator with the concomitant open ending. However, the theme of the social outcast is politicised in the picaresque where social critique and self justification compete as dominant themes.

The incorporation of reincarnation and references to the *Obra Espiritual* create a fictional perspective reminiscent of magic realism. By appropriating reincarnation as a way of explaining/recreating her life - similar to Eva Luna's stories which serve to interpret her life - Jesusa creates a means of coming to terms with existence or with alternate selves (Scott 1992:413). This idea is also present in the concept of reincarnation which implies an open ending so characteristic of the picaresque because it represents different phases of spiritual accomplishment. Jesusa refers to her past life in order to deal with the tribulations of the present existence. It is, however, implicit that she will return to do more earthly penance in another guise in future.

The explicit denunciation of society in Jesusa's commentary at the end implicitly echoes Lazarillo's ambivalent fate at the end - because in actual fact he has not been accepted by society except as a scapegoat for their sins. As Jaén (1987:26) intimates, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* denies the neat expected ending:

66 Translation: the most elemental and basic meaning of testimonials is that they are evidence of a continuous history. At the same time, the message transmitted by the testimonial not only gives evidence of the past but also a different way of living the present.

Esta es la actitud paradójicamente ascética del pícaro que algunos críticos encuentran difícil de aceptar e incluir dentro de la ética picaresca pero que precisamente aparece en estas obras para desmentir, como siempre, nuestras tendencias clasificatorias o limitadoras de las obras literarias.⁶⁷

This also raises an important aspect of fictionalization which is prominent in the picaresque tradition, namely the retrospective assessment of a person's life from the vantage point of experience and maturity. In fact, in her seemingly artless way Jesusa is already imposing order on experience and therefore fictionalizing it as well. It is clear, however, that both Jesusa and Poniatowska subvert male authority to assert their independence: Jesusa by assuming control of her life (Kushigian 1987:676) and Poniatowska by inscribing Jesusa's life as a testimony to abuse.

In conclusion, one could perhaps reiterate Lemaître's (1985:751) observation on Jesusa, namely that she is one of those women who "no se dejaron dominar por nuestra sociedad patriarcal, aun cuando hayan sido víctimas de una sociedad clasista".⁶⁸

67 Translation: This is the paradoxically aesthetic attitude of the *pícaro* which some critics find difficult to accept and include within the picaresque ethos but which appears in these works, exactly to disprove, as always, our classificatory or inhibiting tendencies of literary works.

68 Translation: who do not allow themselves to be dominated by our patriarchal society even when they have been victims of a class conscious society.

4 THE POLITICAL AND THE PICARESQUE: A QUESTION OF STRATEGY

4.1 The contemporary *pícaro*: variations on a theme

True to its modal character, the contemporary picaresque is defined by its relevant socio-political context¹ which, in women's literature, is informed by the feminist struggle for social equality. As a critique of society, it presents the ideal vehicle to highlight the plight of women both as marginalized subjects and as objects of sexual abuse or, in Eustis's (1984:167) terms, it constitutes the ideal framework "for an ideologically charged denunciation of contemporary society". Consequently, the *pícaro* in contemporary women's fiction is introduced as a double victim, both of society and male society in particular, to reinforce and thus expose male domination as a collective social force.

Due to its pervasive influence, male domination is not readily identifiable and subversive strategy seems an appropriate tool to counteract this influence. Kathleen Barry (1989:564) points out that

Male domination is an historically structured reality which is cast into multiplicities of microlevel realities which render it invisible as a unified structure. Only when it is deprivatized and externalized can it become treated as a collective force.

The conventional protagonist in the picaresque tradition is usually a young male person but as several critics (Brink 1990; Friedman 1987; Hanrahan 1967 and Van Gorp 1978) have pointed out, women protagonists have also been used.² In fact, Van Gorp (1978:40-41) notes how the introduction of

¹ In this respect, I refer to Eustis's (1984:163) contention that the influence of politics has been underestimated in the interpretation of the picaresque when he claims that "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" has been largely ignored.

² See Chapter 2 for details of the relevant texts.

a *pícaro* has engendered a more psychological interpretation of the picaresque:

Met Justina en Helena krijgen we ware tegenhangers van de *pícaro*. Wat meer is, de titelfiguur krijgt hier meer aandacht dan in de *pícaro*-roman het geval was. Het lijkt wel een eerste, zij het erg embryonaire aanzet tot een psychologisch analyserende verhaaltrant.³

Van Gorp (1978:41) also refers to the contrast in approach when he draws attention to the fact that the *pícaro* exchanges one master for another while the *pícaro* replaces one lover by another. Consequently, social issues assume a stronger moral dimension in the feminine picaresque.

However, it must be strongly emphasized that the representation of the *pícaro* has, until recently, only been observed from a male stance. The *pícaros* were depicted by men who saw women through the conventionally male-biased view of the time - which left little scope for any other role model but that of courtesan and prostitute (Hanrahan 1967:199) rather than the rogue as such.⁴ In fact, Hanrahan (1967:206) admits that it is a male-dominated world where all the faults are conveniently attributed to women but he also (Hanrahan 1967:371) partly blames the expository nature of the picaresque - which concentrates on the deficiencies in social/sexual relationships - and partly also the antifeminist tradition in the literature of the time for the negative portrayal of women as weak, imperfect and sensual. He states that

3 Translation: With Justina and Helena we encounter true parallel characters of the *pícaro*. In addition, the protagonist/title character receives more attention here than it used to in the *pícaro* novel. It then seems to be a first, although embryonic attempt at psychological narrative analysis.

4 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.

todas están unánimas en presentar a la mujer como objeto de la concupiscencia, como un mal que hay que evitar, atractiva pero peligrosa y engañoso en extremo. No es sorprendente ni nuevo que esta presentación obedezca a la suposición de la superioridad masculina y al antifeminismo escético.⁵

It is exactly this stereotypical role of women which is subverted in women's literature. 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 narrative 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 wherewithall to circumvent the established codes of behavior".⁶ 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 pícaras of their success" and make them "worthy predecessor[s] to Defoe's *Moll Flanders*".

5 Translation: all are unanimous in representing the woman as an object of lust, like an evil that has to be avoided, attractive but dangerous and extremely deceitful. It is not surprising nor new that this representation should conform to the supposition of masculine superiority and antifeminist aesthetics.

6 This statement elucidates and substantiates Hillela's final stance in *A sport of nature*.

It seems quite ironical that only a few male critics such as Miller (1967) and Rico (1984) openly refer to, or tacitly acknowledge the part of society/culture in the creation of female picaresque protagonists, when it seems only logical that the precepts set by a corrupt society cannot produce exemplary citizens. As *pícaras*, women suffer the same exploitation as men but they also have to endure the sexual discrimination and abuse customary in a patriarchal-oriented system.

The fact that the *pícaro's* plight has never before been considered from a female perspective is also evident in Monteser's (1975:106) idealistic but short-sighted and doubly ironic pronouncement claiming that Latin America has no more need for social critique and hence for the picaresque:

but there is no more reason for picarismo in Mexico, Peru, or Argentina than in any other growing, modern nation. Until the cities of Latin America reach a point beyond their optimum, until there are extra human beings of no value to society, and until a social stratification which excludes mercy for Lazarillo develops anew, we cannot look for the pícaro in Mexico, Central, or South America again.

Monteser (1975:106) seems to sadly underestimate social depravity and discrimination because it is debatable whether this point will ever be reached and there is no better refutation of this statement than the works of the women authors discussed in this thesis.⁷ Despite modern upliftment programmes, socialist politics and good intentions, human nature runs its course and social and cultural marginalization and poverty remain central issues in postcolonial regions such as Mexico, Chile, Argentina and South Africa.

Friedman (1987) has written an illuminating study on the representation of the *pícaro* in selected texts from various literatures from the earliest times till the present. His point of departure is the ironic voice, or as he calls it,

7 This point is belaboured by Allende and Poniatowska within the Latin American context and by Gordimer within the South African scene.

the implied author which directs and manipulates the discourse and the "revelations" of the narrator/*pícaro*. The approach is refreshing in that he includes two contemporary women authors, Elena Poniatowska and Erica Jong, in his repertoire which enables him to expose the subtext of female oppression from different angles. Yet, the exposure of injustice and inequality in male renditions does not imply restitution and consequently, it is only in the assertive stance of women authors who take recourse to the picaresque that we identify the strong motivation to explore avenues of attaining social equality through obvious dual/complementary perspectives.

Earle (1988:991) defines the basic traits pertaining to the Latin American picaresque as "la circunstancialidad, la desvalorización y la revelación",⁸ aspects which correlate with those identified in Chapter 2: the autobiographical context, irony and the dialectic between fact and fiction which undermines the validity of "truth" *per se*. He also identifies a much broader scope in resolution when he (Earle 1988: 991) explains that "la revelación no se manifiesta en forma de doctrina religiosa ni sueño utópico, sino a través de una nueva sensibilidad que abarca el amor, la magia, lo cómico, y la violencia (muchas veces colectiva)".⁹ This evaluation then also explains and identifies with the modern version of the picaresque in which the attitude and personality of the *pícaro* diverge from those of the archetypal and conventional female protagonist.

Judging from *A sport of nature* and *Eva Luna*¹⁰ as examples of a contemporary picaresque, the female version of the mode seems to be characterized by a more acute historical and political awareness and an assertion of female consciousness and social equality. This fierce desire

8 Translation: Circumstance, devaluation and revelation.

9 Translation: the revelation does not manifest itself through religious doctrine or utopian dream, but by a new feeling which embraces love, magic, comedy, and violence (often collective).

10 Several critics recognize and discuss *Eva Luna* as a picaresque-oriented novel: Earle (1988); Gálvez-Carlisle (1991) and Rotella (1991). Rotella (1991:126) states that "*Eva Luna* declares itself as a picaresque novel, inserted in the centuries-old tradition of picaresque fiction and, moreover, with a woman - a *pícaro* - as its protagonist".

for independence which is already manifested in Jesusa Palancares, is also evident in Hillela Capran and Eva Luna. The traditional *pícaro*¹¹ has evolved into the woman as outsider (rather than the deceitful slut) and as the victim of a male society. She displays an independent and courageous spirit and emulates men's duplicity/double sexual standards by beating them at their own game. As Rotella (1991:128) asserts: "Pícaras are not by definition prostitutes but they resort, whenever convenient, to the tricks of the trade, thus adding sexual promiscuity to the picaresque vices". In this respect, both Hillela Capran and Eva Luna turn men's weakness into their own strengths.

There is a definite progression from the archetypal image of woman as sex object to a liberated perception of woman as equal. This is achieved through the juxtapositioning of old and new, personal and political, and exploiter and exploited but especially through the representation of male and female dual or multiple perspectives. However, the main thrust is still evident in the image of the *pícaro* as a product of society. The retrospective stance then provides perspective on the past, and through the exposition of a corrupt society - which is a universal phenomenon and in which the reader also recognizes himself/herself as a member - self-justification. The narrator's stance in the present suggests that she still has a future which in turn implies an open ending so typical of the picaresque in its subservience to the ironic mode employed, and the constant dialectic between fiction and "reality". In fact, an open ending leaves the reader with no final resolution and he/she is consequently placed in the unenviable position of being asked to judge but also being prevented from doing so by his/her own social complicity. A position remarkably similar to Gordimer's within the South African scenario.

It is significant that the contemporary *pícaro* is not averse to emotional relationships, as we can observe in Hillela Capran and Eva Luna - and even Jesusa Palancares to some extent - who find it impossible not to become involved in personal relationships, because it indicates a subtle shift in stance from the original *pícaro*'s total social disinvolvement and

11 Here I am referring to the first female pícaras mentioned above who were merely represented as objects of desire.

alienation. Earle (1988:993) observes this progression and also remarks on the predominant influence of space and context in the postcolonial picaresque:

En ellas hay también un imborrable trasfondo de soledad, de la que *el espacio* es metáfora, de esencia americana, de vida errante, de seres en un estado de perpetua desorientación.¹²

This opinion is a direct refutation of Monteser's utopian vision which ignores the political realities and past history of Latin America and by implication also other postcolonial regions such as South Africa.

The conscious reconstruction of experience within an autobiographical frame of reference which was already evident in *Lazarillo* is continued in the contemporary picaresque. The retrospective stance is modified by experience, as Poniatowska's rendition of Jesusa's story indicates, as the italicized metacommentary suggests in *A sport of nature*, and as the alternative accounts of Eva and Rolf's life stories imply in *Eva Luna*. Eva Luna is a writer of stories and as such shows an awareness of the fictional representation of experience. As Earle (1988:995) astutely points out:

Eva Luna experimenta, como sus antepasados Lazarillo y Pablos, un duro aprendizaje. Pero desde niña va elaborando no sólo su espíritu de independencia y honradez sino también su innato talento de escritora.¹³

This consciously acknowledged creative aspect is associated with the fictional quality of literature and the questioning of the validity of "reality". The picaresque effectively juxtaposes "reality", or the historical account,

12 Translation: They always have an indelible background of solitude, in which *space* is an essential American metaphor of a peripatetic existence and of beings in a perpetual state of disorientation.

13 Translation: Eva Luna experiments like her predecessors Lazarillo and Pablos with a harsh apprenticeship. But since her childhood she has not only developed her spirit of independence and integrity, but also her innate talent for writing.

with fiction, or the reconstructed account of "reality". Jesusa, Hillela and Eva are aware of this discrepancy and where Jesusa takes recourse to spiritualism, Hillela qualifies in the manipulation of people and circumstances and Eva reverts to story telling. In the epigraph of *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1984) Jesusa also expresses her doubts concerning reality when she maintains that

Algún día que venga ya no me va a encontrar; se topará no más con el puro viento. Llegará ese día y cuando llegue, no habrá ni quien le dé una razón. Y pensará que todo ha sido mentira. Es verdad, estamos aquí de a mentiras; lo que cuentan en el radio son mentiras, mentiras las que dicen los vecinos y mentira que me va a sentir.¹⁴

The following commentary in *A sport of nature* (*Sport*:100)¹⁵ also underscores the feeling of unreality:

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.

And Eva in turn claims: "I began to wonder whether anything truly existed, whether reality wasn't an unformed and gelatinous substance only half captured by my senses" (*Eva*:167).¹⁶

14 Translation (Franco, Jean 1988:180): One day soon you will not find me: you'll meet with nothing but the wind. That day will come and when it arrives, there will be nobody capable of explaining what happened. And they will think that everything has been a lie. It is true, that it is a lie that we are here, lies that they tell on the radio, lies that the neighbours pass on, and a lie that you will miss me.

15 *Sport* refers to: Gordimer, Nadine. 1987. *A sport of nature*. Cape Town: David Philip.

16 *Eva* refers to: Allende, Isabel. 1988b. *Eva Luna*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana.

Thus the ambiguous quality of experience and its rendition in history and fiction is exposed: autobiography becomes fiction and fiction becomes autobiography.

4.2 Nadine Gordimer in context: history, politics, feminism and the picaresque

The themes explored in Gordimer's novels and short stories are inextricably related to a socio-historical context in which racial discrimination plays a major role. Consequently, her acute awareness of history and its interaction with context should act as a constant guideline in the interpretation of her work. Clingman (1986:ix), who has conducted a thorough chronological study of Gordimer's work, also emphasizes this aspect in the preface to his book on Gordimer when he cautions that

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.

As a writer, in similar vein to Poniatowska and Allende, Gordimer (1989:136) herself is also very aware of change, the perception of social consciousness and the role of the writer in society.¹⁷ She claims that

'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.

17 Smyer (1992:74) relates the position of the South African writer to writers of other authoritarian countries.

Both these statements above stress the relevance of social and historical context in Gordimer's work and her attempt to present "her fictional characters as well as herself as subjects informed by the historical texts of this country" (Jacobs 1993:27). This interaction between text and context in Gordimer's work is also effectively described by Martin (1986:18) when he states that the novel, *Burger's daughter*, "demonstrates that discourse is an effect of real historical events and also produces real historical effects". This would, however, also imply 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.

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,¹⁸ both in her political opinions and, as Clingman (1986:8) notes, in her particular concern with the integral relationship between private and social life. 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 which has perhaps inadvertently also focused her attention on different aspects of marginalization and in particular, the plight of women. Several critics have remarked on this shift in emphasis. Among others, 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; Parker (1989:214) remarks that her novels "have shown a trajectory of increasing radicalisation"; Greenstein (1985:228) neatly defines Gordimer's position when she identifies the shift as one related to "Gordimer's view of her situation as a South African and a writer" while Rich (1982:60) perceives Gordimer's development as a

move towards seeing the African landscape not as a deadening backdrop for the white segregationist imagination but the focus for a liberating African consciousness that will eventually transcend white cultural and political domination".

18 Clingman (1984:171) briefly traces this evolution in relation to the relevant political contexts.

Like most politically-aware South Africans, Gordimer feels impelled to speak for the oppressed and it is perhaps this urge to comprehend, express and compensate for the plight of the oppressed/the "other" - to act as historical conscience - that has sublimated/submerged the undeniable influence of her particular ideology, social class and gender. Consequently, in her enthusiasm for the cause, she might be guilty of another kind of colonization, namely, the white liberal writer's dilemma in attempting to render (an)other point of view. Greenstein (1985:230) describes this "hidden agenda" as follows:

Whether powered by white curiosity and guilt, or set in motion by admirable motives and the relative freedom of whites in South Africa to act on political conviction, it is a plot that always threatens to colonize black experience.

Gordimer (1973:38) herself is not unaware of the intrusion of her ideological background, but she finds it inevitable and acceptable as long as it does not take on the shape of conscious propaganda. As she claims (1973:38), "The novelist writes about what sense he makes of life; his own commitment to one group or another enters his novel as part of, sometimes the deepest part of, the sense he makes of life". Clingman (1984:166) regards the black body which stubbornly refuses to remain buried in its shallow grave on Mehring's farm in *The conservationist* as a metaphor for Gordimer's repressed consciousness. However, he (Clingman 1984:168) explains that

There is no obvious similarity by way of psychological repression between the writer and her character. Yet what the two *do* have in common is that both are situated in a society in which fracture and oppression are linked.

This interpretation anticipates the role which the physical body will play in Gordimer's subsequent novels and also underlines the concretization of her creative process by means of characterization in *Burger's daughter* and *July's people*.

The realization that personal relationships are incapable of resolving racial barriers and social inequality has then contributed to Gordimer's disenchantment with liberalism. This already becomes evident in her novel *A guest of honour*, where Bray's role and violent death seem to contradict Gordimer's supposed liberalist stance. Wade (1978:159) perceives the rejection of liberal humanism in exchange for a new approach to African "reality" and politics to be embodied in Bray's struggle to come to terms with Africa and the role he plays as a European in its struggle for liberation. His life constitutes an analogy to Gordimer's struggle for artistic liberation and introduces the concept of the physical confrontation with history and "reality" which is explored and clarified in subsequent novels to represent the rejection of an idea in favour of a reality which is Africa. As Wade (1978:159) describes it, "the objective meaningfulness of this idea is ephemeral: its elaborate and ornate structures have turned to mist, dispelled by the African sun". This implies the recognition of new values and criteria of judgement. To conclude, *A guest of honour* introduces the reader to several themes and images which will feature more prominently in Gordimer's subsequent novels: the concept of sterile knowledge of an idea as opposed to the physical realities of experience; the concept of "double exposure" (Wade 1978:153) which will evolve into an overt dual perspective and the commitment to survival as adaptation, (Wade 1978: 158) and can be related to Hillela's final "mutation".

Lorraine Liscio (1987:248) seems to concur with this interpretation because she points out the crippling effect liberal humanism has had on Bray when she claims that he "enters history in a decisively personal way and in so doing relinquishes a liberal political ideology that left him free but unaccountable for a radicalism that engages him fatally". This could then serve in explanation of Gordimer's "puncturing the delusions of South Africa's liberals and proposing more efficacious and more committed alternatives" (Peck 1988:79) in her subsequent novels. She has come to realize the inherent potential of power to corrupt and the limitations of ideology and, as Alexander (1988:237) correctly perceives, 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".

Consequently, in her search for an alternative rendition of experience and her "own African perspective" (Greenstein 1985:228), she is also confronted by the question of "whose story will get told and who will tell it" (Greenstein 1985:228) - analogous to Elsa Joubert and her rendition of Poppie Nongena's "story". This awareness prompts her to explore the boundaries of social responsibility from a different perspective, as her novels *Burger's daughter*, *July's people* and *A sport of nature* testify. These novels also reflect, to a great extent, Gordimer's artistic evolution as well as her change in political stance, so that Rosa's dilemma in *Burger's daughter* also mirrors Gordimer's dilemma as an individual and an artist who wishes "to free her art from Prospero's complex" as Judie Newman (1985:87) defines the unconscious political bias embedded in her fiction. Trump (1989:184) also perceives this paradox to be "discernible in the style and form of her writing as well as in the nature of the readership of her work". Although I would concur with the former remark to a certain extent, I do not feel that the readership question is very relevant because she is addressing the society responsible for the oppression, which is the "highly literate, sophisticated, and therefore privileged readership" - the white elite. She is in fact bearing testimony to oppression.

Moreover, Gordimer's reversion to a more objective and fictional approach in *A sport of nature* is graphically illustrated by Smyer (1992:73) in his reference to the title as a clear indication of Gordimer's artistic intention when he explains that

The terms "variation" and "new variety" suggest that *A sport of nature* is a different kind of work in relation to Gordimer's previous fiction. "Mutation" might imply a fictional narrative in the process of adapting itself to the changing realities of South Africa during the interregnum between the white rule and the post-revolutionary future, and also a literary imagination sensitive to the direction of African history and open to the artistic challenges presented by history.

This interpretation would clearly accommodate the political and fictional qualities which inform the picaresque.

In her commitment to social and political issues, Nadine Gordimer had never previously considered the plight of women as worthy of particular attention. In a statement made in the seventies, Nadine Gordimer professed that she regarded all writers "as androgynous beings" (Gordimer 1989:113)¹⁹ thereby implying the irrelevance of feminist issues. In her opinion women's rights have been subsumed under the liberation struggle and have therefore been irrelevant as a distinctive cause. This fact is confirmed by several critics. Susan Greenstein (1985:230), for instance, refers to "Gordimer's conviction that the paramount concern in her country can only be the devastating oppression of blacks" while both Karen Lazar (1990:102) and Dorothy Driver (1983:33) point out that Gordimer assumed feminism to be a manifestation of a white female bourgeois ideology and thus a concept which could be summarily dismissed. Sheila Roberts (1982:45) is then quite accurate in her assessment about Gordimer's earlier stance when she 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".

Due to Gordimer's ambivalence on feminist issues it is therefore 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. She (Driver 1983:37) argues that

19 Driver (1983:33) reacts to this statement by asserting 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 Gordimer's rejection of it is directly related to the colonial context.

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) also draws a 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.

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.²⁰ 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 could have contributed to her recognition of the validity of women's claims. Greenstein (1985:231) refers to the ambiguous position of the white colonial woman in Africa as "both oppressor and ancillary victim" and she argues that Gordimer's historic consciousness has had to acknowledge this reality.²¹

Gordimer's transformation shows a movement away from the personal towards the social. When Lazar (1990:104) states that Gordimer's "variation in approach to sexual questions makes it difficult to read her

20 Trump (1989:187) observes that "some of her best works deal with areas of women's experience and her description of the 'the female subculture' bring [sic] a valuable dimension to her work".

21 Several other authors also equate racism with feminism (Greenstein 1985; Newman 1985).

stories either as feminist or as anti-feminist representations, and this ambiguity of interpretation is heightened by her frequent use of the ironical voice", she raises an important characteristic of Gordimer's fiction, especially in *A sport of nature*. In the latter text, the ironical tone is crucial in its interpretation because it not only carries an implicit critique of society, but also implicates the reader. It is important to realize that 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.

I would therefore like to suggest that Gordimer's revised political scenario, as illustrated in *A sport of nature*, involves a broader and perhaps more philosophic view of human relations. Her choice of the picaresque mode confirms this opinion because it illustrates and implies an awareness of the pernicious influence of power games - that the transfer of power could easily result in a reverse situation. Gordimer's reliance on historical context as a directive in her writing is closely related to her awareness of the function and influence of intertextuality.²² It is probably this awareness of self-expression and the act of reconstructing and reinterpreting history and experience - of writing oneself into history - which has motivated her to explore the picaresque mode in *A sport of nature*. It provides, simultaneously, a paradigm within which to explore individual and social tensions as well as the dialectic between history and fiction. It is this act of writing which assumes significance in women's literature because it defies silence and historical obscurity/distortion. Thus, ironically, Gordimer's motivation correlates with the feminist drive to expose injustice although she has never consciously identified with it. Liscio (1987:247) also points out that Gordimer's "literary enterprise resembles that of feminist writers" because of her preoccupation with the personal and racism which can be equated with any form of oppression as being "powerless, invisible, speechless, without a history, and alienated from itself" (Liscio 1987:247). I would like to contend that it was her

22 A feature extensively discussed by Jacobs (1993) in his article on *My son's story* and openly acknowledged by Gordimer as a cornerstone of her art.

exploration of inverted power relations in *July's people* and Rosa's bid for individual responsibility as a woman and a citizen in *Burger's daughter* that prompted her to recognize that racist and sexist discrimination are analogous collective forces which do not necessarily invalidate individual differences.

A change in perspective would also necessitate a change in expression. As a strategy, the picaresque conveys the underlying irony of the South African political situation while at the same time underlining the oppression of women within that society. In this 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 which differs from the conventional realist approach previously favoured by Gordimer.

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.²³ Even though often acknowledged or recognized, such strategies and devices are soon forgotten in the fray of the political and ideological debate which blatantly ignores the new direction indicated in her writing and uses historical or "realist" issues as criteria for evaluation.

Parker (1989:210) makes the perceptive observation that Gordimer provides "a clue to the title and thereby also the focus through which the reader observes" in *A sport of nature* but he is not sufficiently alert to the underlying nuances in the text. In fact, Parker (1989:220) accurately

23 In this respect, Smyer (1992:72) refers to "the Gordimer whose fiction many readers have come to expect".

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.

Even though Newman (1988:93) notes several features pertaining to picaresque literature, the open ending, social critique and the presence of irony, she focuses on content at the cost of mode. Consequently, she recognizes the feminist slant and the interplay of fairy tale motifs such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, but does not consciously interpret them as fictional alternatives to realism. Newman (1988:100) is aware of the picaresque form²⁴ but because she does not adhere to its precepts in her reading strategy, her interpretation remains as inconclusive and fragmented as the novel is purported to be.

It is singular that, although the presence of picaresque elements is mostly recognized (Glenn 1986:76; De Kock 1988: 47; Lenta 1988: 141; Newman 1988:93 and 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 apparent deficiency of irony in the text. For example, Glenn (1986:76) accuses her of writing "without the resources of irony or hindsight; De Kock (1988:46) asserts that it falls "uncomfortably between whimsy, historical realism and optimistic political

24 Lenta (1988:141) also relates *Hillela* to *Moll Flanders* and identifies a picaresque "pattern" but then reverts to a realist-oriented interpretation which she acknowledges also seems inadequate (Lenta 1988:144).

prognosis"; Abrahams (1988/89:28) proclaims in turn, that "satire is not the mode of her seriousness" and Cooper (1990:83) ignores the power of literary conventions/codes which inform a text and therefore fails to perceive irony as a major catalyst in Hillela's situation. Furthermore, as Gordimer is attempting to minimize ideological intrusion by resorting to the ironic ambivalence of the picaresque mode, she is therefore also unjustly accused of polarization into a "struggle between good and evil" (Cooper 1990:79).

In contrast with the critical opinions voiced above, 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.

However, it seems that Jacobs (1987:31), in his discussion of "Something out there", suggests and anticipates something of Gordimer's future appropriation of fictional devices in her work when he mentions the difficulty of capturing the "ultimate elusiveness" of the South African reality. He (Jacobs 1987:33) seems to imply that a lack of imagination in the South African society becomes a metaphor for narrative inadequacy from a realistic perspective. He also (1987:35/39) maintains that identity and narrative are both social constructs which have no "proof against contingency". Thus to avoid a "fixed" or one-sided impression of reality, Gordimer reverts to external (public) and internal (private) narrative strategy which provides her with some objectivity and distance. This device is not only reflected in her imagery of "being seen while seeing" (Jacobs 1987:40) but also constitutes the basic theme of the dialectic between private and public and, reality and fiction which will feature prominently in *Burger's daughter*, *July's people* and *A sport of nature*. Jacobs (1993:36) confirms the self-conscious and fictional quality of Gordimer's writing - which also characterizes *A sport of nature* - in a recent article when he states that "In contrast to their generally perceived mode of realism, Gordimer's novels reveal, I believe, an increasing tendency to advertise and problematize their own textuality".

The different aspects of the picaresque previously highlighted in this thesis,²⁵ all point to the central role of the narrator (qualified by the ironic retrospective stance and open ending) - and the implied author. As Friedman (1987) has also convincingly identified this aspect in his title as the functional core of the picaresque, my analysis will mainly focus on the role of the narrator and the concomitant feminist stance cum social critique evoked in the narrative process. As far as the open ending is concerned, it is closely related to the pícaro/narrator who is relating events in retrospect and usually in self-justification and in refutation of any possible critique, whether from society or the reader in particular. Furthermore, it serves in illustration of the ironic stance and undermines the distinction between fact and fiction.

4.3 Gordimer's female protagonists: feminist assertion and identity.

The experiences of the female protagonists in *July's people* and *Burger's daughter* form an important backdrop to the issues explored in *A sport of nature*.²⁶ In fact, Greenstein (1985:230) maintains that these two novels free Gordimer "to purge her fiction of the remnants of the age of imperialism". Similar to Gordimer's struggle as an artist, both Maureen and Rosa struggle to establish a personal and social identity in a colonial-influenced, male-dominated revolutionary society. All the female protagonists 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. Together, the titles of the two

25 Identified as the autobiographical stance, the use of irony and the conscious dialectic between history and story/narrative

26 Newman (1988:93) also recognizes *A sport of nature* as the culmination of various themes explored in Gordimer's preceding novels.

texts, *Burger's daughter* and *July's people*, illustrate two sides of oppression in South Africa: the use of the possessive adjective defines the usurpation of identity, of accepting the other on your terms and not their own or, as Smyer (1992:77) describes it: "the self-alienating role defined by the expectations of others". Maureen Smales finds life as a woman in July's rural community intolerable and she flees into an unknown future and possible 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.

In a comparison between Coetzee and Gordimer, Martin (1986:4) identifies the role of the narrator as an attempt "to discover and understand (at least in part through the very act of narration) his or her own responsibility within that crisis". This implies the search for an identity and ultimate social responsibility. In *Burger's daughter*, Gordimer illustrates through Rosa the realization that the individual is inextricably connected to the social/political and historical reality of his/her time. However, she also stresses that overemphasis of political reality leads to a denial of the physical reality (body). Consequently, Rosa who is first exposed to political reality at the exclusion of all else is subsequently exposed to sensual experience but also at the exclusion of political reality. When she finally decides to return to South Africa and her political heritage it is, however, on her own terms and as an assertion of her female identity. She works with bodies as a physiotherapist and thus combines a political ambition/conviction with a practical application. Daymond's (1984b) preoccupation with political issues and historical references - evident in her title: "*Burger's daughter*: a novel's reliance on history" - causes her to underestimate the two most contentious issues in the text,²⁷ namely, Rosa's stance and the significance of the open/ambivalent ending.

Rosa Burger, whose whole life has been overshadowed by her father's political affiliations, has to choose between being a mistress or being imprisoned on the presumption that she endorses her father's political

27 These issues inevitably form the central concern of any critical assessment on this particular text as well as on *July's people*.

convictions. Since childhood, Rosa has been cast into a role conforming to her father's political image with the result that her private life, emotional and physical experiences have been neglected at the cost of a public image. Rosa is defined by others' conceptions of her and who they think she is or ought to be (Martin 1986:11). Consequently, Liscio (1987:249) notes that she needs to "get in touch with her self, body, voice, and modes of perception" in order to develop into a balanced person and attain an awareness which would incorporate the "integrated forces of mind and body" (Liscio 1987:252). Ultimately, as Peck (1989:28) observes, it is the dialectic created between Conrad's selfish personal preoccupation and Lionel's sterile public ideology which informs Rosa with the knowledge of her own sensuality/sexuality in *Burger's daughter*. However, he commits the same error as Cooper does (1990:82) about Hillela, when he perceives Rosa's approach on her return as being "distinctly minimal and disappointing, suggesting little beyond alleviating individual suffering while waiting for a future that will be designed by others". In fact, Rosa returns secure in her own femininity and individuality and aware of her social responsibility - she faces physical reality just like Gordimer does in her art. I would suggest that perhaps the main clue to this predicament is to be found in the question: Why Burger's daughter, why not his son? I contend that this is an indication of Gordimer's growing concern with women as individuals within the broad spectrum of an unjust society and that she focuses on and explores, in particular, a woman's perception of and responsibility to herself and society. Her disillusionment with liberal humanism which surfaced in *A guest of honour* has prompted her to look at social responsibility.

Although Clingman (1986:171) acknowledges that "Rosa's career is measured out in the novel in relation to that of her father" he does not explore the feminist implications of this fact in the interpretation of the novel. Rosa has a limitation of choice: to become a mistress would imply resignation to a stereotypical image of a woman and once more assuming "a fixed role" (Newman 1985:93) and a denial of responsibility/accountability while, to become politically engaged would imply conforming to the precept set by her father. Newman (1985:86) perceptively outlines Rosa's choice when she asks:

Which vision of Rosa do we accept? - that of a white woman who is part of a racist society and who can address a "You" who exists only in her own projections? Or that of a woman confronting and correcting a stereotyped image and painfully learning to address herself to a world of other autonomous beings?

Yet, I would suggest that her choice signifies a conscious bid for equality in the struggle for a common cause, "in becoming socially and historically committed" (Clingman 1986:179) and assuming her own brand of responsibility²⁸ because, as Greenstein (1985:237) observes, she must "find her own way to live in Africa", to speak for herself. However, the feminist assertion also emerges quite clearly through Rosa's awareness of her physical, sensual nature and her power as a woman. She has the freedom to choose and she rejects the image imposed on her by society as Newman (1985:95) also clearly indicates when she says that

Rosa's progress towards autonomy involves coming to terms with the mythic masks which men have fastened over the female face - whether desexualised or erotically reified - and correcting the errors of her own internal eye.

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.

28 Greenstein (1985:234) remarks that through Rosa's attempt to come to terms with herself and her heritage the "novel revises several of the central plots of the literature of empire". This seems to represent a milestone in Gordimer's political and literary evolution.

Visel (1988b: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".

The so-called "futuristic" ending of *July's people* has raised a lot of speculation: some critics assign a positive interpretation to it (Clingman 1990:47) and others regard it in a negative light (Lenta 1988:135 and Roberts 1982:50), while Carolyn Plummer (1990:73) and Visser (1990:63) attach sexual connotations to it. However, although I would not entirely discount Visser's interpretation - he might have some justification for this when seen in the light of the physicality projected by both Rosa and Maureen - I maintain that the ending is purposefully undecided to act as an injunction to the reader/society to assume responsibility and therefore create his own resolution to the ending. It calls for the active participation of the reader as a member of society. Perhaps this is what Visser (1990:66) indirectly implies when he says that

The significance of Gordimer's conclusion lies not, then, in the particular fate of Maureen: it does not really matter whether we see her opened up to negative judgement or going to seek her revolutionary destiny (though the latter, in its very vagueness, comes closer to capturing what is going on at the end of the novel). Maureen has been overtaken by something far larger than herself.

I would, in fact, argue that like Rosa, Maureen takes a decisive individual step towards a new future and that this action becomes symbolical of her newly born identity as a woman and an individual. Plummer (1990:73) actually refers to Maureen's naked exposure to the rain and her crossing the river as stages in a process of rebirth. In *July's people* her first "baptism" is described in terms of a visionary experience:

Soon her body was the same temperature as the water. She became aware of being able to see; and what she saw was like the reflection of a candle-flame behind a window-pane flowing with rain, far off.

The reflection moved or the glassy ripples moved over it. But it existed - the proof was that there was a dimension between her and some element in the rain-hung darkness (*July*:48).²⁹

This image is again reinforced at the end of the novel when Maureen's crossing of the river is a symbolic action: she thereby leaves her old life behind her, like Hillela leaves her "cultural baggage" behind. Maureen:

moves out into the water like some member of a baptismal sect to be *born again*, and when the water rises to her waist, holds her arms (the shoes in one hand) high for balance while her thighs push swags of water before them. The water is tepid and brown and smells strongly of earth. It seems tilted; the sense of gravity has wavered. *She is righted*, suddenly come through onto the shallows of *the other side* and has clambered the cage of roots let down into the mud by the huge fig-tree, landmark of *the bank she has never crossed to before* (My own emphasis) (*July* 1982:159-160).

Her fate is therefore almost immaterial because it is the step towards the unknown future that is positive - just like Gordimer's attempt to break out of the colonial cocoon which inhibits her artistic vision. Clingman's (1990:47) claim that "it is this liberatory revolution in her *own* identity that leads her on in her commitment towards this risk" seems acceptable. Furthermore, Plummer (1990:73) reminds us that it is a question of survival and that "the protagonist, after relinquishing her past, must take whatever chance remains to survive".

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. Smyer (1992:80-81) then perceives Hillela as a new kind of heroine who is not committed to choose between "legal dissent and social conformity". She is the hybrid who is willing to chance the future which her cousin Sasha envisions: "It will take another kind of being to stay on, here. A new white person" (*Sport*:187). Her choice of apparent

29 *July* refers to: Gordimer, Nadine. 1981. *July's people*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

subjugation is in fact a bid for power, the only possibility for a woman forced to obey the rules of a man's game. Consequently, Cooper's (1990:82) criticism about feminist issues being subservient to that of national liberation in *A sport of nature* would ring true for the "old" Gordimer, but she seems to ignore the picaresque slant which induces a different interpretation. Hillela is attributed with a more assertive role than merely showing deference to male wishes as Cooper (1990:83) would suggest when she claims that Gordimer's

primary concern is to illustrate the ways in which her new breed of White South African can love, serve and physically worship *black* men. She is not alone in this. It is also, by now, an old African tale, as women's issues are sacrificed to the prior claims of national liberation.

In fact, 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 would then seem that most of the criticism levelled at Gordimer has been based on realistic premises and coloured by political prejudice. Although it might perhaps be unfair to judge these critics from the vantage point of hindsight, it would seem that they all succumbed to the temptation of political debate without paying the necessary attention to fictional devices and reading strategies. For instance, Daymond (1984:159) who has always been particularly sensitive to feminist issues, also seems to be misguided in her interpretation of *Burger's daughter* when she regards it as, primarily, a testimony to liberal political ideals perpetuated "across the generations of a family". She does not recognize the burgeoning feminism in Rosa's final stance nor the subtle speculation of the ambivalent ending - which are again explored through Maureen Smales in *July's people* - and forecast the advent of a Hillela.

The alternative/dual perspective(s) often implied or overtly juxtaposed with that of the protagonist in women's literature, is also introduced in the above-mentioned novels. It is employed to point out different points of view or to create the awareness of a subtext - such as July's story - which presumes another set of criteria/norms. Martin (1986:11) makes the interesting observation that this device is not so much to enhance our understanding of the events as to reveal the constant dialectic between fiction and reality: it is intended to "de-centre the event itself, to expose the role of ideology, of interpretation, of narrative devices, of history itself, in our understanding". In fact, the retrospective narrator is engaged in a process of intertextualization as Martin (1986:13) describes it:

The narrative thus presents itself as an historical event which is related dialectically to both the events it narrates and the "consciousness" which produces it: it is constituted by them, but also is constitutive of them. And again, this discourse (Rosa's own) is always "read" by both Rosa and the reader in the context of the others which surround it, as well as those it contains - Conrad's, Katya's Lionel's and so on. The vast web of language and other events which evade, invade, and pervade any single discourse, any single subject, is thus continually present.

For this purpose, the autobiographical paradigm presents an ideal vehicle, particularly because it functions in a retrospective way which allows a revision/interpretation of previous events while at the same time providing scope for the reinscription of experience in the present text in order to create a future different from the past. Maureen's evolution to self-realization is connected with her retrospective attempt to understand her past - to face her physical reality - in order to be able to "see" (Plummer 1990:72). Martin (1986:12) also perceives this process in Rosa and the different versions of her life when he asserts that

She is not constituted as a consistent and self-present individual "behind" the "I" or "she" of the text, but rather composes herself in the text, in her attempts to articulate not only her self-identity, her

sameness, but also the discontinuities produced by her difference from herself across history and across discourse.

Consequently, Gordimer captures the essence of experience and its translation into literature when she presents Rosa's thoughts as:

My version and theirs. And if this were being written down, both would seem equally concocted when read over. And if I were really telling, instead of talking to you in my mind the way I find I do ... One is never talking to oneself, always one is addressed to someone (*Daughter*:16).³⁰

Thus Rosa clearly illustrates the inherent tension between the personal and the public; the dialectic between fact and fiction and the interaction between the individual, society and history; the inevitability of social commitment and of the individual as being part of history. As Martin (1986:12) summarizes it: "the subject is not self-present or completely autonomous, but is constituted in its relations with others and in language itself".

In *Burger's daughter* and *July's people* Rosa and Maureen attempt to determine their identities. Both have had their lives defined by the men in their lives and their social status. Rosa conducts a one-sided dialogue with important characters in her life while Maureen's story is told against the background of July's different but "obliquely" (Greenstein 1985:238) told version. Greenstein (1985:239) recognizes Gordimer's attempt to distance herself from a personal stance and create scope for other voices, when she points out that

Gordimer neither ignores July's story nor presumes to tell it. In a departure from her own previous work she structures this novel

30 *Daughter* refers to: Gordimer, Nadine. 1987a. *Burger's daughter*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

around the inaccessibility of this crucial story to whites of her time and place.

Maureen's perception of July illustrates the fact that her story of the past and his concept of it will never correlate and that July's story were better to be told by himself. This is doubly significant because of their ethnic and social differences as well as the difference in gender. Ironically, both are marginalized and yet empowered characters in different ways: July as a man but black and Maureen as a white but a woman. They have to write their own story to reinsert themselves into history. Both *Burger's daughter* and *July's people* anticipate the social inversion/marginalization and sexual liberation which will constitute the main themes of *A sport of nature*.

It is then apparent that the expansion of her parameters has made Gordimer aware of other pertinent issues and the plight of social minorities so 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. However, the introduction of a *pícaro* instead of a *pícaro* as the victim of society constitutes 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 her personal condition as a woman confronted with a political dilemma. A female-oriented reading of the text reveals this underlying but potent irony as the main thrust of social critique.

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 broadened perspective. Similar to Allende, who introduces a male perspective through Rolf's story in *Eva Luna*, Gordimer also introduces a male stance in the person of Sasha and his letters in *A sport of nature*. His perspective underlines the duality of male and female experience, the unreliability of a unilateral perspective and constitutes, together with the more pronounced emotional involvement of the *ptcaras*, a significant adaptation to the mode.

4.4 *A sport of nature*: irony as moral corrective

4.4.1 *Hillela as ptcara*: role inversion as social critique

In an analogy drawn between racism and sexism, both Greenstein (1985:228) and Newman (1985) allude to *The tempest* as an example of the colonization myth and refer to white colonial women as "Mirandas". This comparison is further elaborated by Greenstein (1985:228) when she exposes the dominant male concept of women as idealized prizes, thereby providing an excellent explanation for the creation of a character such as Hillela who is ironically labeled a freak of nature because she dares to challenge the *status quo*. Greenstein (1985:228) explains the female predicament as follows:

One consequence of being thus idealized is that women are categorically denied a piece of the action, which is reserved for a male protagonist. As a result whenever the daughter of empire has metamorphosed into the female adventurer, in fact as well as fiction, she has been regarded as an anomaly, an "honorary male". She is relabeled to minimize the challenge to the prevailing pattern in which an invitingly supine continent is penetrated by aggressive explorers and fortune hunters.

This situation is evident in *A sport of nature* where Hillela is rejected by the company of women mainly because of her blatant sexuality - there is certainly nothing coy about her - and their resultant jealousy, and her

good-natured acceptance into the company of men because of her direct approach.

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 salves 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 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).³¹ 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/ambiguous concept. Lenta (1988:141) seems to miss the irony evoked by Hillela's childhood innocence because like Lazarillo, Hillela's innocence is contrasted with the hypocrisy of society and unless this clue is correctly interpreted, the ironic sting of the ending will also be lost. We are not "intended to admire the woman she becomes at the end and to see her as a successful cultural amalgam" as Lenta (1988:141) presumes, but rather to recognize her as a revealing mirror image of society and the reader.

Hillela's personal life is unsettled, a situation which Newman (1988:100) accurately describes as "an exile from childhood, an eternal guest of honour, going 'home' in school holidays to a family location chosen arbitrarily for her by others". She is abandoned by her mother as a small child and has to accompany Len, presumably her father, on his travels as a salesman with the result that Hillela becomes part of the "baggage" of Len's profession:

31 *Sport* refers to: Gordimer, Nadine. 1987. *A sport of nature*. Cape Town: David Philip.

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 [sic] 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). The imagery of photographs and mirrors is often used in Gordimer's work and it is particularly effective in *Burger's daughter* and *A sport of nature* where both the female protagonists, Rosa and Hillela, have only photographs of their respective mothers as evidence of their identity. In contrast with life, a photograph is a "still life", a moment suspended in time, which can only be interpreted within a certain context. Similar to a mirror image, it only shows the exterior surface. Jacobs (1993:30) also notes a different dimension to this image which evokes and reaffirms the personal versus public perspectives when he quotes the following lines from the text:

In the trance of women gazing at themselves in the mirrors they face, she is seeing herself. The mirror ends her there (*Sport*:7).

This image takes on an even deeper meaning when we consider the omniscient narrator to be Hillela who is "looking back" at herself.

Ironically, their mothers also represent two disparate aspects of reality: Rosa's opted for public allegiance to a cause at the cost of her private life and family, while Hillela's opted for her private life but also at the cost of her family. Rosa remarks about her mother: "There is supposed to be a particular bountiful attractiveness about a woman who is unaware of her good looks, but if, as with my mother, she literally *does not inhabit them*".

In contrast to their mothers, whose photographs are the only sign of their existence, both Rosa and Hillela choose to live in active commitment to their beliefs - even if Rosa is imprisoned and Hillela has to achieve this by devious means. Here Newman's (1985:84/92) reference to the analogy between racism and sexism and the absence of an autonomous identity in the oppressed - that the oppressed usually assume the projections conferred on them by the colonizer - seems to create an interesting correlation with the supposed interpretation of photographs, because both Rosa and Hillela defy the "fixed role" assigned them by their respective parents and by

society at large.³² A correlation is also made between the fixidity of photographs and mirrors when Jacobs (1993:29) refers to Rosa's relationship with her father and notes the "looking-glass complexities of the relationship between a South African political figure and his daughter".

In fact, Smyer (1992:75) interprets the photographic image as a metaphor for the political stranglehold of politics/history which had previously prevented Gordimer's artistic evolution and resulted in "a flattening of the artist's complex vision of reality into a reportorial prose". The denial of creative freedom, or, "imaginative autonomy" (Smyer 1992:75) - of which J.M. Coetzee is fiercely protective and for which he is unjustly criticized by Cooper (1990:91), among others - results in the colonization of the writer by which he is "defined by the expectations of others" (Smyer, 1992:77).

Hillela's two aunts (perhaps rather self-consciously) 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 possessions³³ 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 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

32 It might be of interest to mention here that Sasha is also caught up in a "fixed" role conditioned by his parents' politics.

33 Jacobs (1993:42) points out that the constructedness of the characters' lives is represented in the description of their homes or their "living space": Olga's mansion is "antique-filled" in contrast to Pauline's "appropriately open-planned house".

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).

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 and denial of feminist concerns. 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. She is only a "freak" from their perspective because she refuses to conform to their standards. This attitude becomes doubly ironic because she learns to "conform" by playing their game of hypocrisy and power politics.

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 quietly 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).³⁴ 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).

Gordimer's incisive criticism also pierces the carefully-constructed propriety of girls' schools where subterfuge is regarded as "harmless" adolescent rebellion. Boy-meei-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"

34 Hillela's statement that "there was no threshold between her reflection and herself" (*Sport*:272) recalls JfRosa's vision of herself in the mirror in the bar in France.

(*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 mndonzo 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 (*Sport*:9).

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.

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 *pícaro'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 conventional hysterics ascribed to women or their supposed female vanity. Hillela seems to represent the culmination of Rosa and Maureen's realizations of physicality which Cooper (1990:71) links to her politics and describes as:

Hillela's politics are physical, her decisions instinctual, her training experiential. Her sexuality, far greater than mere sexiness, is a huge and awe-inspiring kind of radical passion. She merges and flows with her environment, her daughter, her friends, her lovers.

This description could perhaps act as a response to Lenta's (1988:139) criticism of Hillela as being untheoretical in contrast to Pauline. It is exactly this characteristic which saves Hillela, because she reacts to instinct and not to ideas. She does not heed prescription, which conforming to the South African life style would entail. Consequently, her instinctual response to her environment is to survive and her point of orientation is global and not local. The General senses this quality in Hillela. He recognizes her unbound spirit and admires her reliance on her sexuality as her source of strength, as the following description of his consciousness implies:

Everyone has some cache of trust, while everything else - family love, love of fellow man - takes on suspect interpretations. In her, it seemed to be sexuality. However devious she might have to be (he realized he did not know why she should have wanted to be chosen by him) and however she had to accept deviousness in others, in himself - she drew upon the surety of her sexuality as the bread of her being (*Sport*:283).

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.

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 kindheartedness 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".

The variety of names, denoting different identities, which Hillela adopts, her detached emotional attitude, vagrant lifestyle and opportunist streak all identify her as a modern *pícaro*. 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, fluctuating 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 *pícaro* 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 infidelities 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 *pícaro*. 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. Yet, Lenta (1988:140) does seem to have a valid point of criticism when she claims about Hillela that

almost all her learning is done from men, the real repositories of knowledge, and the effect is that she emerges at the end of the novel as an honorary man. This particular term has been applied as a reproach to many politically powerful women: the seriousness of the reproach here is against Gordimer, who presents a woman who 'knows' only sexually and therefore only men.

However, in defense of Gordimer, it must be kept in mind that she is subverting male authority by means of a *pícaro* figure and this is only possible within the parameters of such an authority. Castillo's (1992:53) description of how American women novelists have subverted the conventional character of the female protagonist seems appropriate to the situation in *A sport of nature*:

The woman, once the idealized, dominant, but passive pole of the love relationship, has, through the romance novel, inverted the schema and, while appearing sweetly subordinate, has managed to accede to power and authority by the only route possible to her, through her emotional sway over a powerful man. Moreover, her values are revindicated as his values.

Hillela's final role could be correlated with Cathy Burger's role in *Burger's daughter* to whom Liscio (1987:250) refers when she claims that

the silence associated with women should not be confused with apathy or disinterest but that "we must conclude that there is a very definite relationship between female silence, absence, and what we understand by revolution". The only difference is that Hillela has become articulate, she represents a combination of both political and physical pursuits, public and private life.

4.4.2 Technique and/as subversion

In her discussion of *Burger's Daughter*, Margaret Daymond (1984:163-164) points out the significance of the first-person narrator in modern novels:

first-person narration is a signal to readers that they will encounter a consciousness which cannot be relied on to give either an accurate or complete picture of events and feelings. The narrative mode indicates that a subjective view of matters can be only a partial one and that in the act of recall, of reconstruction of the past, remembered events are coloured by the motives or needs of the present.

In the picaresque mode, the mature first-person narrator who is re-examining the past, is juxtaposed to his original youthful identity which results in a type of implicit dialogue with the past. However, this dialogue is illustrated in *A sport of nature* by alternating the first and third person stances which constitute the two extremes in traditional autobiography as Starobinski (1980:76-77) explains:

One must learn from external information that the narrator and the hero are one and the same person. In general, such a process is expressly a depiction of a series of important events in which the editor puts himself into the scene as one of the principal actors. The effacing of the narrator (who thereby assumes the impersonal role of historian), the objective presentation of the protagonist in the third person, works to the benefit of the event, and only secondarily

reflects back upon the personality of the protagonist the glitter of actions in which he has been involved.

In *A sport of nature*, the first person represents the personal perspective while the so-called public or historical perspective is represented by the third person narrator.³⁵ In the case of Hillela Capran, an apparently neutral narrator, assuming a public persona, recounts events chronologically in retrospect. The present dictates a reassessment of the past and "it becomes necessary to retrace the genesis of the present situation, the antecedents of the moment from which the present 'discourse' stems" (Starobinski 1980:79). However, the impersonal quality of history as a public document and its consequent unreliability as a personal source is underlined and reinforced by the introduction of a personal commentator on/witness to the public version of Hillela's life to inscribe her personal experience which could act in mitigation/defense of public judgement and explain a person's/woman's actions. As the act of reconstruction involves memory and imagination, the dialectic between "history" and "story" as constructs is clearly implied.

Jacobs (1993:38) also discerns this overt dialectic when he states that "The frame between the real and the fictive dissolves in this narrative that flaunts its seams. It advertizes its intertextuality". He (1993:38) then subsequently refers to the alternation in focalization, social and narrative construct, documentary and personal evidence but "most importantly, by repeatedly drawing attention to the many lacunae, absences and silences in the narrative itself - the blanked out areas where it cannot approach the truth of its subject, Hillela, and she escapes it".

In *A sport of nature*, the third person narrator is juxtaposed with personal comments and letters by Hillela and Sasha respectively which act as metacommentary. This double discourse - where the personal comments are printed in italics to emphasize the disparity between the different perspectives - performs a similar function as in *Burger's daughter*, where

35 Cabrera (1991:43) also points out this technique in Allende's *The House of the spirits* which functions in a dual capacity as fiction and history.

Liscio (1987:248) also distinguishes the "private, disruptive voice and the public, conventional one". It also bears resemblance to *July's people* where the events are seen through Maureen's consciousness or her perspective but the tone is objective like Hillela's deceptive third person narration.

As far as the italicized sections are concerned, Irvine (1986:121) points out that sexual dualism can be illustrated in various ways in women's novels. She refers particularly to Sylvia Fraser's *Pandora* as an example where

italicized type alternates with ordinary type, overtly splitting inward and outward narration. Many of the passages in italics present Pandora's often unacceptable private thoughts, residue of the unconscious, and contrast them with a socially sanctioned outward expression. As might be expected, the intruding unconscious reveals sexual tensions, just those dichotomies that inevitably, although not always obviously, structure society's institutions - home, school, church, and court. Cultural development and personal development intersect.

It is interesting to note that Barry (1989) relates the significance of biography and the role of consciousness. This could be equally well be applied to the autobiographical aspect evident in Gordimer where the mature Hillela acts as a "biographer" who observes her youthful self. Barry (1989:568) states:

Consciousness and praxis finally close the gap between the observer and observed (scientific model) or the subject and the other. Through critical reformulation of her acts which are located in the construction of a sex-class, the biographer is finally in a position to reveal her subject as historical.

The focalizer is then the mature Hillela relating her actions as seen from an external, social perspective but this view is "corrected" or adjusted by means of the ironical tone and the personal comments/letters. Here we are forcibly reminded of Rosa Burger's "My version and theirs" (*Daughter*:16)

and perhaps also of tante Sophie's version of Pieter van Vlaanderen's conviction in *Too late the Phalarope* where the personal is also justified in terms of social guilt.

Several authors have criticized the apparent fragmentation of the reportage in *A sport of nature*. When Cooper (1990:84) remarks on "a contradictory authorial voice - both know-nothing and all-knowing" she is identifying Gordimer as the omniscient narrator instead of the mature Hillela, and ignores the underlying irony of public versus private which constitutes a major theme in both *Burger's daughter* and *A sport of nature*. Thus her example of Gordimer's point of view being mingled with Hillela's when the latter is debating on leaving Brad, is not valid because the example quoted from the text is in italics and clearly identifies Hillela as focalizer:

The other will not die. Not even a herd of elephant will trample him out. He is not beautiful, he carries his Parabellum, he knows how to deal with sons, in him the hansclasp compresses the pan-pipe bones of the hand with which it makes covenant; it is, on recognition, irresistible (*Sport*:281).

Newman (1990: 86) also fails to appreciate the significance of alternate and multiple perspectives as Gordimer's attempt at neutrality and as indicators of possible variations in interpretation and Parker (1989:211), although he interprets the italic script in *A Sport of Nature* as a visual representation of the metalanguage, 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.

The dual/multiple perspective is also directly related to the open ending which is often criticized. However, within the picaresque frame of reference this implies the crucial participation of the reader who is also in a position of judgement. Reminiscent of Gulliver in Swift's *Gulliver's travels* the narrator is human and fallible, but so is the reader by implication and the open ending then provides the reader with an important opportunity to change or adjust his stance. In *Burger's daughter* and *July's*

people the open endings perform similar functions to *A sport of nature* where the open ending must be interpreted as an indictment of society and the complicity of the reader in a system of oppression. The reader is consequently invited to take a stance whether to perpetuate the injustices of the system by incarcerating or marginalizing anyone who opposes it, or by making a difference and accepting and accommodating **difference**.³⁶ The image of imprisonment reflects society's/the imperialist's intolerance of **otherness**. Rosa is prohibited from making her unique contribution to society as a woman and citizen. Will she or others like her be given a fair trial?

Finally, viewed from this perspective, the three novels mentioned above: *Burger's daughter*, *July's people* and *A sport of nature*, all reveal a decided testimonial quality as they assert individual identity, in this case feminist identity, and protest against social injustice.

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* who demonstrates:

36 It is the reader's participation which Daymond (1984:162) fails to explore sufficiently although she senses its "strong emotional charge" and implied suggestion as to "how things might be different" (Daymond 1984:168).

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 (1988:85) 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.

Recent novels by women seem to show a predilection for fantasy and metafiction as effective strategies of subversion. Although certain picaresque traits might still feature strongly, construction is foregrounded

with the implication that women, empowered by writing, construct their own lives and write their own history: in this way, Eva Luna creates her own space and identity.