

# The Abject Body of History

Fleshing Trauma in Nadine Gordimer's "Tape Measure"

NOURA EL AOUN

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*Abstract: Across the disciplines and ages, the human body has been approached as complex, political, and mysterious. Caught in an intricate socio-cultural fabric, it acquires and projects multiple patterns of symbolism, seized by literature to convey deep realities and perplexing themes. The body has become to be recognised as an eloquent metaphor for postcolonial writers, effectively staging the resistance to colonial practices and discourse. It is from the insides of such a body that the strange voice of a worm emerges and recounts its memories in Nadine Gordimer's short story, "Tape Measure," from *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (2007). Drawing on the insights of trauma studies, this paper focuses on the body as a metaphor to show how its use addresses the problematics of memory reconstruction and its limitations in the South African context. The unnatural voice of the worm articulates South African history as an abject "body" marked by "filthy" crimes, proposing the legacy of racism as an "excremental" practice that stains South African reality. The analogy finds its purchase in Julia Kristeva's theorisation of the "abject" as "lack of cleanliness" and "monstrous"; history, thus, emerges as dark and deformed, and memories are hard to "expel."*

*“The body itself has also been the literal ‘text’ on which colonisation has written some of its most graphic and scrutable messages.”*  
(Aschcroft et al., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 321)

*“My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recoloured, clad in mourning ... The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly.”*  
(Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*)

## INTRODUCTION

Post-apartheid South Africa has been shaping its national identity and reconfiguring its multiple “races” in an environment that is marked by massive loss, trauma, and disorientation. By the 1990s, apartheid was over, the African National Congress won the elections under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) embarked on a painful cruise for truth that has later proved difficult and sometimes impossible. Coming to terms with the past is a laborious enterprise, fraught with disillusionments and disappointments about ever being able to emerge cleansed, whole and healed as a nation. Telling stories and giving voice to traumatic memories were at the heart of assembling the pieces, in order to recover individual and collective identity, to inscribe difference, and to redeem the silenced and the suppressed. However, the TRC’s work yielded “a primarily descriptive rendition of the past, uneven in its discernment of detail and indifferent to the complexities of social causation” (Graham 32).

Within this context, Nobel prize winner Nadine Gordimer stresses the “writer’s essential gesture” when she states that “the creative act is not pure. History evidences it. Ideology demands it. Society exacts it” (*The Essential Gesture* 3). She, thus, advocates the artists’ commitment to the social and political demands of their age. Her diverse writings and stylistic experimentations celebrate the imaginative freedom and the unquestionable power of the word to engage with the unspeakable and the horrific. The unlimited potential of textuality provides the ground to examine the past, to translate the present, and to address the thorny issues of the future. According to Gordimer, there is no escape from digging up the truth, no matter

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how hard and painful it might be. Using different modes and genres, she accurately surveys her nation's ordeals through the apartheid and post-apartheid eras to present the reader with unique narratives that weave imaginative style and technique with an eye for detail, capturing experiences and transferring their intensity. For her "it is a matter of finding the approach that will release the most from the subject. The form is dictated by the subject ... to make the identification for the reader with what is being written about and with the people in the work" (Schwartz 78). And the subject of post-apartheid reality, indeed, posits challenges in reporting the past, as fictional storytelling intertwines with actual testimonies in the course of the work of the TRC. Gordimer's post-apartheid works mark the transition in South African literature from raising the alarm about apartheid to treating its lingering effects and exposing its horrors through truth-telling.

However, as Shane Graham asserts, post-apartheid literature "exhibits a collective sense of loss, mourning, and elegy, as well as a sense of disorientation amid rapid changes in the physical and social landscape. These changes necessitate new forms of literal and figurative 'mapping' of space, place, and memory ... Implicit in this idea is the assumption of complex interconnections between the body, memory, and social space" (1-2). The difficulty proceeds from the impossible erasure of the racial legacy with the inevitable distorted and contested nature of its verbal articulation. Correspondingly, in Gordimer's "Tape Measure" (2007), this process takes unusual routes, following writers that strive for techniques that would translate the complexity and impossibility of mourning and reconciliation, confessing in part to the barred access to the past in pure storytelling. Faced with a reality marked by historical complexities, social and economic contradictions, and a scale of damage beyond horrendous, Gordimer manipulates an unnatural mode of narration to approach the South African problem. Reading "Tape Measure," one gets the impression that there is a clear statement by the writer that a conventional mode of story-telling, with a straightforward narrative expression of the South African reality, would not accurately reflect its intricacies and ramifications. In fact, in an extreme narrative move, Gordimer assigns the task of story-telling to a worm that inhabits a human body. The worm speaks from inside the intestines, accompanied by the digested food in its weird journey out. While talking animals are not unconventional in narratives and genres across the ages, a first-person-narrating worm, coupled with the intestines as the setting, constitute an atypical and disturbing narrative situation and composition. The unnatural voice invites readers to drop

mimetic approaches and stretch their interpretive faculties, to reflect on the possible allegorical function of speaking from the insides of a body, presented as abject, stained by the deep-seated anxieties and the buried brutality of apartheid. The body hosts the abject worm as it tells its story, in the same way a disfigured South Africa hosts the countless stories of abuse.

Accordingly, this paper focuses on the body politic, to show how the use of the body as a metaphor addresses the problematics of memory reconstruction and its limitations, as part of the national healing process. In the words of Desmond Tutu, exposing the past is an attempt against “collective amnesia.” Ingeniously, Gordimer draws on the great potential of the body to problematise history, suffering and the complexity of recovering the past. The body as the main locus of experience under the apartheid regime—imprisonment, torture, and indentured labour—finds the articulation of the traumatic in the short story through a voice that emerges from the inside. Foregrounded as the primary site of history on which suffering is inscribed, the body must be urgently engaged with. The idea of the abject slowly takes shape in the short story, pointing to the “filthy” crimes suggested by the excrements that ironically repel the worm. The analogy finds its purchase in Julia Kristeva’s theorisation of the “abject” as “lack of cleanliness”; history, thus, emerges as dark and deformed, and memories are hard to “expel.” The focus will be on how the unnatural narrative voice opens up new paths in the portraying of traumatic experience, where its actual verbal manifestation in the context of the TRC has consensually failed, somehow. In fact, “the TRC’s ambit was too narrow, too constrained by the Commission’s political mandate, and it ignored and downplayed whole categories of human rights violations for the good of national stability and reconciliation” (Graham 32). The different levels of symbolism the body displays will be revealed as we follow the worm in its journey through the intestines. The present argument follows Graham’s postulate that post-apartheid artistic and cultural productions prevent collective memories from becoming “ossified ... because they become so familiar” (4); hence the accent on the defamiliarising narrating figure of the worm in this paper.

Citing the example of *The Story I am about to Tell* (1997) as a prominent post-apartheid cultural production, Graham explains how this play in its form and unfolding enacts the “calcification of memory” occasioned by the TRC proceedings. From another perspective, engaging with the question, “how does one map the intimate networks of memory, identity, body time, space, and place?”, Antji Knog’s *Country*

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*of my Skull* (1998), Graham argues, condemns the marginalisation of black victims' stories in favour of a disconcerting interest in the white perpetrators' accounts. Graham also notes that "Knog's memoir ... refuses an easy closure through artificial mourning" (49). Within the same context and of special correspondence with the focus of this paper, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Hillbrow* (2001) adopts second-person narration which establishes a direct communication channel with the reader, while simultaneously allowing "the 'you' to continually shift and expand to include an ever-larger webs of relations" (Graham 114). Strange narration, thus, comes as an alternative to denounce "the Christian doctrine of confession and forgiveness" (101), denying closure to a complex collective narrative.

### URGENT DEMANDS, TWISTED MEANS: IT SPEAKS THROUGH THE BODY

South African history has been the theatre of numerous upheavals; a palimpsest of encounters between different ethnicities, each leaving a lasting mark on people, the land, and the individual. One particular word that automatically evokes South Africa with a shameful tone is apartheid. Apartheid in Afrikaans means "separateness and apartheid" (Aschcroft et al., *Postcolonial Studies* 14). The term literally denotes physical separation between blacks and whites in space through segregated public spaces and facilities, townships, and cities. Through a series of laws initiated by the white Nationalist government in the 1940s, it remained the official policy that regulated the life of natives up until its dismantling in the 1990s. Shockingly, black South Africans were subject to multiple atrocities and injustices. These could be categorised depending on the nature of damage. Thus, we can speak of psychological, physical, social and/or cultural harm, among other aspects. The one that is most akin to the human being and of most outrageous nature is physical harm. The South African black body was the direct recipient of apartheid injustice in the form of brutal violence, sexual offence, slavery, indentured labour, displacement, and starvation. Consequently, engaging with the body is crucial for its rehabilitation. In his *The Location of Culture* (1997), Homi Bhabha notes that the skin "is the prime signifier of the body" (82), and in the case of black South Africans, it was perceived as an indicator of an inferior self; as a body to subjugate, mutilate, and enslave.

Accordingly, postcolonial literature offers pictures that depict the postcolonial body through multiple lenses to record the painful experiences and to identify

and denounce the different webs the body was caught in. Accurately, theorists on their turn insist on the postcolonial body as a site of discursive intervention as it was (1) negatively constructed in discourse and (2) brutally treated in reality. Represented in the most derogatory terms, the “savage” and “primitive” body, just like the land, invited colonisation, exploitation, civilising, and taming. It follows that “bodily presence and awareness in one sense or another is one of the features which is central to post-colonial rejections of the Eurocentric and logocentric domination” (Aschcroft et al., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 321). On top of being “otherly” as non-European, the South African black body was a source of anxiety as threatening. This was manifest in the Immorality Act (1950) which prohibited white-black marriage or sexual intercourse, a clear statement of fear from miscegenation and an attempt to preserve the purity of “race.” In line with Deepika Bahri’s interest in the postcolonial body, the short story, thus, “claims biology as a valid—indeed a crucial—area of interest for critical postcolonial studies in order to direct attention to the question of life lived in the psyche and the flesh after empire” (viii). What follows will take us through an improbable narrative experience that allegorises a nation’s past through engaging with the body politic.

“All I can do is trace back along my length how I began and lived and what has happened to me. My beginning is ingestion...” (Gordimer, “TM” 19), thus spoke the intestinal tapeworm inaugurating the short story and its journey of being expelled from its “home.” The voice immediately strikes the reader as a narrative deviation that departs from both conventional storytelling and conventional narrative reception. The reader is prevented from understanding the narrative in accordance with familiar parameters, as the technique occasions a break with a cognitively retrievable experience, following mimetic norms. A mimetic recuperation of a narrative, according to Monika Fludernik, resorts to the cognitive frames and scripts that shape our bodily existence in the world (121). Thus, Gordimer’s worm narrator departs from the natural conception of a speaking voice that can only be a human voice. Interestingly, the worm announces: “Once I’d been ingested I knew what to do where I found myself, I gained consciousness ... and began to grow myself” (“TM” 19, emphasis added). Indeed, actual speech situations can only emanate from a human consciousness; hence, the worm seems to “reassure” the reader that it has gained consciousness and knowledge, with clear analytical skills as it processes its new environment. The worm seems to share the faculties of a human consciousness,

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as it is endowed with memories and perceptions, conveying an elaborate account of an entity undergoing a traumatic experience.

Given the disturbing effect of unnatural narratives for the reader, it is clear that these techniques obviously convey more than mere experimentation and play. It seems that post-apartheid reality resists understanding and articulation in a conventional narrative that unfolds according to known logic and parameters. The reader is, thus, being reminded that natural human story-telling within the context of the TRC has failed the victims and their attempts at voicing horror. In post-apartheid South Africa, the “rediscovery of the ordinary” (Ndebele 160) was a journey into so-far concealed and distorted realms: a long history of social and economic discrimination practically impossible to redress, a multitude of suppressed narratives that uncover the ugliness of a violent past, and a national identity to reconceive and reconstruct. Johannesburg and its suburbs, the townships, and the Bantustans emerged as sites of irreconcilable realities and deeply rooted paradoxes. On the “black side,” diseases, poverty, violence, and hatred were gnawing at society, while the government, international assistance and personal endeavours were at loss, faced with such a complex task. The so-long privileged whites had to concede power and confront the legacy of injustice perpetrated by their “race” over generations. In order to deal with the past, the TRC set the nation on trial to recognise the legacy of violence, using the cathartic power of public testimony to heal trauma. However, the competing versions of truth, the outburst of the psychological manifestations of trauma, and the heavy yet unfulfilled demands of justice, made the work of the TRC contentious. The aspirations of establishing a “democratic and open society” and committing to “improve the quality of the life of all citizens” (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, preamble) have remained largely chimerical. From another perspective, rather than “closing the book” of the past, “the TRC helped make possible the continual writing and rewriting of that book” (Graham 16).

Correspondingly, an alternative voicing of history is demanded, and there is no delay in the short story in establishing the allegory of South African black suffering: “NO-ONE of any kind or shape or species can begin to imagine what it’s like for me being swirled and twisted around all manner of filthy objects in a horrible current” (“TM” 19). Automatically, an informed reader retrieves images of South African natives being displaced, subject to all kinds of suffering. The symbolism of the voice speaking from the guts is also very powerful, as the guts represent a canonical metaphor for authenticity, truthfulness, and intense emotions. Thus, it both speaks for

and encapsulates the traumatic past, suggesting that the only way to cure is by exorcising the demons. Interestingly, the Greek “trauma” originally refers to an injury inflicted on a body (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3), enhancing the appreciation of Gordimer’s manipulation of the voice that emerges from inside a body.

Speaking of voice, Caruth asserts the impossibility of representing trauma by a direct and linear rendering (*Trauma* 144). This is precisely the significance of the worm as the unnatural narrative voice. Processing the worm’s discourse in its “self” depiction, one sees the unmistakable projection of a hidden entity that lurks inside an individual and that has “many kinds of nourishment to feed on, silently, unknown, and unobserved” (“TM” 19). In an analogous way, traumatic memories inhabit the collective as well as the individual psyche, and “grow to take up a lot of space” inside (“TM” 20), affecting psychological and mental health. The worm’s “host” is unaware of the existence of this parasite that grows comfortably inside; equally, memories of traumatic past events do not fade with time, and the illusion of healed wounds hides a more terrible reality for the victims of harm. The worm/trauma grows bigger, and “feeds” on the “host’s” insecurities, on long inflicted injustice and on the internalised inferiority that cripples any healing.

It is undeniable that the crimes of the white government under the apartheid regime cannot be easily eradicated. They constitute a monster that haunts the collective and individual consciousness. Suppressed and silenced, it grows beyond control. The worm’s endeavours to “speak” and “tell” engage us into a listening and responding typical of the therapeutic practice. This is also reminiscent of the process undertaken by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that is, public hearings of the so long ignored and silenced stories of the victims. These stories are “parasites” that inhabit the social body; they have to be expelled for the body to survive and gain integrity. Untold and unresolved, the past turns into “suffocating putrefaction and unbearable effusions” (“TM” 21); “a putrid torrent” (“TM” 22) that poisons life and inhibits progress and proper acts of mourning.

Significantly, the worm has “the knowledge how to grow but not how to die” (“TM” 22). Likewise, traumatic memories do not evaporate just by the fact of being “driven out” or “ejected.” If not appropriately handled/cured, they leave their “eggs” and “the whole process shall begin over again. Come to life” (“TM” 22). This is in line with Elizabeth Stanley’s conclusions about the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in her article: the healing power of the truth has been compromised by “the governmental reticence to provide reparations, the judicial



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disregard to pursue prosecutions, and the dismissal of responsibility for apartheid at a wider social level" (525). This large-scale disillusionment severely undermines opportunities for reconciliation and change, and memories transform into "many kinds of rottenness" ("TM" 21).

Mirroring the resurgence of traumatic memories, the worm is suddenly interpellated by the debris that seems to stifle its existence ("TM" 21). The bitter flow of past experiences submerges being and its "stinking filth" confronts the masses with the "unspeakable." Thus, surrendering first-person narration to a despicable entity can only transmit the accepted idea in trauma theory that "no words yet capture sufficiently the existential intensity and multiple levels of meaning of this particular experience with the abyss" (Lindy and Wilson 691). From the worm as representing and living in "filth," the South African "body" emerges as mutilated, and its open wounds are rotten for lack of proper treatment. The very nature of the worm as a disgusting parasite, the evocation of excrements and "petrification" all coalesce to support the "abject" body as the metaphor that "captures trauma's biological sensorimotor impact," acting as a "cognitive and psychological organiser" to comprehend traumatic experience (Lindy and Wilson 691). Abjection for the reader occurs as memory retrieval takes up the very mimetic journey of "excrements" in their way out of the human body. The unfamiliar voice occurs within what is most intimate to the reader. Loathing for the bodily is, thus, percolated to the abject history with its load of "nauseating" brutality and "dirt."

Hence, using the worm as the enunciating instance grounds the discussion of history in the "flesh and blood"; in the immediately human. It symbolically obliterates the distance occasioned by any ethnic or "racial" belonging, as well as by an immaterial or "objective" processing of history. The advantage of reading with the lens of the abject is that its "horror" contaminates the tendency to sanitise a nation's history. The past acquires an embodied presence and bears the traces of its very violent dynamics. Accordingly, the worm-narrator-excrement acts out both dimensions of historiography: (1) that unreported or silenced stories have to be acknowledged and expelled from the individual and collective mind and (2) that the tendency to produce tempered and cleansed accounts has to be resisted, giving full manifestation of the intolerable and the unattractive. As such, the text does not describe, it rather incarnates the process and the phenomenology of history. Hence, Gordimer's style is an integral part of her argument. The process of healing requires patience and coexistence with the unbearable. Reconciliation can be attempted at, but with

the nation's recognition of the "worm" and "filth" inside. The story's discourse, thus, aims "to articulate the abject in a way that does not repress it," or purify it (Kristeva 37); rather, to bear it and bear with it.

THE BODY POLITIC AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE INTERTWINED

Inseparable from the phenomenology of the worm within the body is the fact of the intestines themselves as space. The description shifts focus from the worm itself and its recollections to stress its movement, foregrounding the intestines as a site and location, with multiple "check points" and stations. Indeed, Gordimer is famed for creating twisted narrative constructions and for playing with metaphors that acquire fragmented, multiple, and even paradoxical layers of meaning. Such is the case of the worm, for as we shall see, the allegory acquires a rhizomatic nature and the worm's journey becomes an allegory of black South Africans' forced removal over time. As the worm is painfully expelled and forcibly moved through the intestines, it gradually experiences a disintegration of the self through its alienation from its natural habitat and "moist-padded soft home" ("TM" 22). The worm is animated by discontent and nostalgia for its home. In the same fashion, the dialectic of place and displacement inhabits postcolonial writing in an obsessive attempt to recover a sense of home and together with it, a sense of self, severely damaged by dislocation. The worm is "driven out mercilessly, hatefully" ("TM" 22), and it experiences the journey as an oppressive removal that enacts the different forms of displacement and relocation natives suffered from. In fact, as dictated by the Group Areas Act (1950), large proportions of black South Africans were restricted in designated homelands known as Bantustans. In addition, over generations thousands were displaced to work in mines or farms, not to mention those who "willingly" changed location to escape persecution and enslavement, abandoning their homes and lands, and hence, their identity and cultural load. In the same fashion, the worm deplors the loss of its "warm and smooth-walled, rosy dark" ("TM" 20) home, blacks found themselves confined to the least productive lands, leaving behind the diamond mines and their agriculturally rich lands. They were dispossessed of their belongings, kinship, and ultimately their identity. Crucially,

a sense of place may be embedded in cultural history, in legend and language, without becoming a concept of contention and struggle

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until the profound discursive interference of colonialism. Such intervention may disrupt a sense of place in several ways: by imposing a feeling of displacement in those who have moved to the colonies; by physically alienating large populations of colonised peoples through forced migration, slavery or indenture; by disturbing the representation of place in the colony by imposing the colonial language. (Aschcroft et al., *Postcolonial Studies* 161)

The spatial removal is inevitably a removal from the past, from a collective symbolic territory, replete with memories of incidents, events, happy and sad, accumulated through generations. Space and history are inextricably linked, and they are definite markers of collective and individual identity. Alienating whole tribes from their lands and to their minds literally from their ancestors amputates their past, their anchorage and sense of who they are. Just like the removed natives, the worm is disoriented, and we can easily place these words in the mouth of a displaced self: “how long will this chaos last and where am I going? Helpless” (“TM” 19). In their previous existence, natives were relatively safe, content, and unharmed. The encounter with the white man was disastrous. Well before apartheid became an official policy, several acts had already controlled natives’ movement and access to land. But with apartheid, their existence was harshly monitored. The Population Registration Act (1950), for instance, classified citizens along “racial” lines in a hierarchy that defined privileges and denied rights; the Mixed Amenities Act (1953) codified racial segregation in public facilities; and the Group Areas Act (1950) divided towns and suburbs into white and black territories. The richest lands were confiscated; the diamond mines made the fortune and glory of the European man. Thus, every aspect of society was subject to segregation, and injustice was institutionalised. A huge gap separated blacks and whites, and though they were living in close proximity in space, they were worlds apart in terms of rights and living conditions. Dislocation is, thus, “a feature of all invaded colonies where indigenous or original cultures are, if not annihilated, often literally dislocated, i.e. moved off what was their territory. At best, they are metaphorically dislocated, placed into a hierarchy that sets their culture aside and ignores its institutions and values” (Aschcroft et al., *Postcolonial Studies* 66).

One particular statement by Desmond Tutu addresses this particular ugly aspect of the encounter with the white man; it says “when the missionaries came to Africa

they had the bible and we had the land. They said ‘let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the bible and they had the land” (qtd. in Gish 101). This reveals that indigenous people, on the whole, may not develop immediate feelings of hostility. Rather, several accounts by a number of early explorers or settlers point to the harmless nature of the indigenous populations, which unexpectedly for them caused their own peril. Drawing the contours of a perfect allegory for suffering, by the end of its journey, the worm keeps wondering why would not there be “a just and fair coexistence” with “both [the worm and the host] satisfied,” “a contented, shared life” (“TM” 21).

To further convey its distress as it realises it is under aggression by medicines targeting it, it laments:

O How I have come to know now! How I have come to know!  
 For what has just happened to me—I can only relive again,  
 and again, in all horror, as if it keeps recurring all along me.  
 First there was that period, quite short, when no nourishment  
 or liquid came down at all. My host must have been abstaining.  
 Then—  
 The assault of a terrible flood, bitter burn-  
 ing, hiping, and pursuing all down and around into  
 a pitch-black narrow passage filled with stinking filth ...  
 My host. So he knew. This’s how he planned to get rid of me.  
 Why? What for? This’s how he respected our coexistence ... It ends up,  
 him driving me out mercilessly, hatefully, with every kind of ordure.  
 Deadly. (“TM” 21–22)

It is indeed perplexing for black South Africans to be invaded, robbed, physically, and mentally abused, in their own lands, while peaceful coexistence could have been envisaged. It is such a perplexity that Gordimer translates through the unnatural voice, faced with the violence and greed of the coloniser. The deviating mode of story-telling is a wake-up call to raise the reader’s awareness about the atrocities, the absurdity of the “race” classification, and the injustice through generations, passed on like a legacy. Ultimately, the past morphs into a burden that has to be discharged of, tracing the natives’ frustrations and ordeals in their struggle for survival, uprooted and displaced. The intricacies of memory and truth, mourning

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and reconciliation, trauma and healing, are thus entangled in spaces as sites of history, cruelty, and injustice. The loss of space is deeply a personal and intimate loss, the reparation of which “has been addressed only in the most nominal and superficial way by the architects of land reform” (Graham 141), which amplifies the frustration with the work of the TRC.

The metaphor achieves completion by the end of the journey, as the worm encounters “more and many, many kinds of rottenness, objects, sections of which [it] sense[s] from [its] own completeness must be dismembered from organic wholes that one such as [itself]” (“TM” 21). In the last phase of its expulsion, the worm comes to realise that its ordeal and displacement are collective experience, in which other “dismembered” “selves” were also brutalised. Mutilated, the South African black subject is exiled and lost. Time and space have to be constantly redefined, as the individual and the communities are losing anchorage and are estranged from their homes.

### CONCLUSION

Across the disciplines and ages, the human body has been approached as complex, political, and mysterious. Far from being reduced to a mere biological entity, the body is caught in an intricate socio-cultural fabric. It acquires and projects multiple patterns of symbolism, seized by literature to convey deep realities and perplexing themes. “Given the fraught history of the role of the biological sciences in histories of racism” (Bahri 142), postcolonial literature recaptures the body discursively, in order to inscribe its difference and worth away from any hierarchy. This diverse and vindictive “body” of literature has established a distinctive type of writing that challenges discursive traditions, the canon, and the dominant ideas, as the major strategy of resistance and revolt against a history of subordination. Postcolonial writers seize upon the verb and ingenious metaphors to allegorise the perils of nations and individuals. Adopting unnatural narration as a strategy in her short story, “Tape Measure,” Gordimer propels the body to the foreground in a striking way, to reconceptualise history and memory, inscribing traumatic experience in its physical and immediate ground.

In the choice of a worm that inhabits a human body as the first-person narrator, the short story enacts an alternative voicing of history and a lucid representation of South Africa as a diseased body, following Salman Rushdie’s statement that, “if history creates complexities, let us not try to simplify them” (65). The choice

of an invisible worm as the speaking voice rejoins Caruth's claim that "trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Gordimer laid the scars of her nation wide open for the external world to see. Fruitfully, it was as a consequence of an untenable state of emergency and pressure from the international community that apartheid was finally dismantled in 1994 and the nation moved to a new era. Writing in the post-apartheid era, Gordimer is aware that the task is complicated and new writing themes emerge. It is mandatory for the nation to face its past and strive to make amends both at the individual and collective level. To abolish the laws and policies that implemented apartheid neither means its end nor the emergence of an ideal society free from racism, segregation and violence. The reality is far more complex and painful to be reduced to a "truth = reconciliation" equation. It appears to exceed the pattern of tell, forgive, and forget. As such, Gordimer's abject aesthetics of dismemberment and excrements emerge as suggestive symbols of the intricate process of history writing, where nothing is complete, stable or finished. In the image of the worm, history is formless and plural, demonstrating how the stylistic incarnates the thematic, allowing the body to unfold as a hermeneutic terrain, being the prime historical signifier. The short story ultimately "teach[es] us to be suspicious of fixed, immutable narratives of historical truth, and to query the motives and interests of those who most insistently proffer their narratives" (Graham 5).

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### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Noura El Aoun is a permanent lecturer of English literature and language at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities Sfax. Her PhD dissertation is entitled "The ethics and aesthetics of unnatural narration in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and Richard Powers' *The Overstory*." Her fields of research include postmodern and postcolonial literature, postclassical narratology,

and ecofiction. Her main publications are: “Reflecting on Teacher Evaluation: How Student Growth Measures Enhance Teacher Growth and Development” *TAYR Quarterly Journal* 5.1 (Feb 2018): 10–25; and “Postmodern / Postcolonial Encounters: Deconstructing ‘the white myth’ in Nadine Gordimer’s “Beethoven was one-sixteenth black.” In *Postmodern and Postcolonial Intersections* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020).