



# The Mirage of the Mirror: A Lacanian Reading of Nadine Gordimer's *Loot*

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## Abstract

As a South African female writer, the works of Nadine Gordimer have been frequently discussed through either the post-colonial or feminist principles of criticism. However, another way to interpret and evaluate these works, particularly her short fiction, can be the application of psychoanalytic approaches, which have been almost often neglected by the literary reviewers. This study aims at a new reading of *Loot*, a very short story by Gordimer, by employing the theories of Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst. Using Lacan's theories of the structure of the mind and its division into three stages of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, and also the individual's quest to reach the fullness of the primal sense of unity and safety, which is lost by his entrance into social order, this reading intends to interpret the protagonist's behavior and reactions in different situations of life. Besides viewing the different stages in the formation of the protagonist's self, the study focuses on the formal structure of the work in its narrative method of story within story, and deviation from the standard language of story-telling on the basis of its Lacanian interpretation as a sign of the individual's inability to cope with the social dictates of the Symbolic order.

**Keywords:** Gordimer; Lacan; the Real; the Imaginary; the Symbolic

## 1. Introduction

When Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) introduced and developed a new field of knowledge known as psychoanalysis, in the late nineteenth century, he could not assume its widespread expansion from a "means of analysis and therapy for neuroses" into "many practices in the history of civilization, including warfare, mythology and religion, as well as literature and the other arts" (Abrams 1999). However, the psychoanalytical theories were reinterpreted and modified by Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) who tried to reread Freud's concepts of subjectivity and unconsciousness more vividly, while emphasizing the role of language as a system of differences, in Freud's works. This is why Lacan's name accompanies his oft-quoted comparison between the human unconscious and language by which both the unconscious and language are "composed less of signs – stable meanings – than of signifiers" (Eagleton 2008). Moreover, he discussed other crucial matters in regard with the human subject such as the desire for a "unitary selfhood" and the connections "between the unconscious and social structure" (Habib 2011).

After a general overview of Lacan's linguistic interpretation of Freud, his theory of dividing the human psyche into three major structures that rule over our lives and desires which are the Real, Imaginary and the Symbolic, will be discussed.

The Lacanian reading of a literary text can be one of the infinite numbers of possibilities opened to the reader and the critic; therefore, this article applies the psychoanalytic principles of Jacques Lacan on *Loot*, a very short story by the contemporary South African writer Nadine Gordimer (b.1923). The aim is to find out how the human quests, desires and losses are the results of the unconscious tensions between the different psychic orders: By focusing on the life of the protagonist and his fate which is shared by all other citizens, a universal picture of the process of the formation of man's self, his desires and conflicts and finally death is shown. Through the interpretation of the symbols and images in the text, the essential principle on which Lacanian psychoanalysis is based will be approved: the unconscious is the ground of all being.

## 2. Lacan and the Human Mental Disposition

The basis of Lacan's principles about psychological growth is almost correspondent to Freudian concepts. However, what is new with Lacan is his insistence on the significance of the linguistic nature of the formation of the unconscious and self. While Freud believed that unconscious is that part of our existence "of which we are not directly aware" but is "fundamental to experience" and governs our whole being (Rieff 1961), Lacan assumed for unconscious a signifying nature. Therefore, unconscious is governed by the same rules that govern language. This means that if language is a system of signs in which each "basic unit has meaning only in relation to another unit" (Con Davis and Schleifer 1998),

unconscious would be governed by the same rules and relations between signifiers and signifieds. This is contrary to Freud who thought of unconscious as a container of blind instincts which “has no organization, no unified will” and no logical rules can be applied to it (Freud 1933). The unconscious for Lacan is not a chaotic rush of unfulfilled desires and forbidden instincts, but an orderly network, as complex as the structure of a language” (Barry 1995).

He shows that the human psyche consists of three stages, namely “the Mirror stage”, “the Imaginary state” and “the Symbolic order” which are interrelated and form a framework through which the individual comes to find himself. Nevertheless, he emphasizes the fact that this process is never fulfilled perfectly, because there is no fixed signified for the objects / signifiers in the world and the subject in its quest to reach completeness moves from one object to another one, but can never find that real lost object whose possession brings fullness for the ego. This is what makes the drama of life a dark tragedy of unfulfilled desires.

### *2.1 The Imaginary Order*

For Lacan the infant lives in Imaginary state in which he knows no” sense of limitations and boundaries”( Bertens 2001). The subject, which is less than few months old, perceives itself as a dis-unified being whose body organs do not provide a unity, but act separately, and the body is no more than a shapeless form. On the other hand, mother, by being ever ready to take care of it and fulfill its needs, is the only agent of security and mental peace to the infant. This is why it imagines the mother’s body to be a part of, and even one, with itself. The Imaginary is the time that the subject recognizes itself as unified with all the objects around and in this way, it experiences a “fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which it can identify” (Eagleton 2008).

The point to consider is that the child does not regard an independent identity for himself, but feels one with his toys, his fingers, his mother and the organs of her body. “Self” is an extension of the objects and unified with the images, and therefore fundamentally imaginary.

### *2.2 The Mirror Stage*

In the Mirror stage the subject tends to assume an identity based on the mirror images that it receives from its environment. This stage of psychological growth begins when the child sees his/her own image in the mirror. Suppose that the child, sitting in mother’s lap, sees its mirror image and discovers that it is a different entity from the mother and has got a distinguishable body, separated from that of the mother visibly. It is surprised and happy by the sameness of body movements, handshaking and facial expressions between itself and its image in the mirror. However, the point which Lacan refers to is the fact that this is a mere misrecognition and in the same way that the mirror images never reflect our true “selves”, what the subject comes to recognize as its actual identity is nothing more than its reflected image by the world outside. The time that child distinguishes itself as an independent existence and is fascinated with its own mirror image believing it to be its real self, has acquired its first recognition of the concept of ego. Although the essential primary chaotic and fragmented self is replaced with a unity and cohesion, the child would learn soon that this unification is illusory because there is no stable signified for the signifier “I” in the world. It should be noted that “this identification is crucial, as without it... the infant would never get to the stage of perceiving him/herself as a complete or whole being” (Homer 2005). However, this misrecognition turns to be the initiation of a chain of other misidentifications which would take long for the subject’s whole life. As far as the Mirror image is never the real self but a reflection of it, this image is considered to be an “other” to the self and therefore the sense of a complete self is only gained through identification with an “other”. This is how the existence of other becomes necessary for all the future experiences of the subject’s featured unity and personal stability. “Alienation” is the other result of the Mirror stage and it refers to the alienation from the mother, with whom it previously identified. It is obvious that this assumption of full independence from the mother is not more than an illusion, for the child still needs mother to be taken care of and survive. This, Lacan calls “the desire of the mother”, which turns to a permanent desire and remains within the subject for the whole future life. As a result, “loss” or “lack” is the unavoidable result of the formation of the ego, itself the consequence of the separation from mother in the Mirror stage. As the child finally understands that the mother’s body is lost to it forever and this desire can never fulfill, it seeks satisfaction of desire in other objects which the subject chooses as substitutes for that original lost object. Obviously, the fulfillment of these desires would never satisfy the subject as far as they are mere substitutes for the ever-lost object. Desire and the quest to fulfill it becomes a part of selfhood and subjectivity.

### *2.3 The Symbolic order*

When the subject moves from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, the feeling of a unified being is lost forever: mother refuses to milk the child, considering it to be grown enough, which in turn causes the desire of the mother stronger in it. The child, grasping every means in order to regain this lost oneness, uses “language” to show the inner desire. Simultaneously, another presence is also recognized at home which makes the previously assumed simple relations more intricate: the presence of the father. This recognition means that it is impossible to possess the desired mother and in consequence to reach a unitary selfhood. This is how the submission to use language is synonymous to the acceptance of the social systems that are configured, for Lacan, as the authority of the father. The Symbolic order, dominated by the name of the father as a pattern of patriarchal arrangement rather than gender superiority, is the realm of “predefined social roles and gender differences, the world of subjects and objects, the world of language” (Habib 2011). As Lacan expresses: “It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the Symbolic function which from the dawn of history has identified his person with the figure of the law” (1977).

While the Imaginary order includes the subject’s identification with images and objects, the Symbolic order, by its linguistic structure, is based upon separation and lack. The subject finds the social life as a set of signifiers and signifieds whose identity is based on difference. As language is “an endless process of difference and absence”

(Eagleton 2008), The subject moves from one signifier to another one and as far as no fixed signified can be assigned to a signifier, hunting for the lost object continues and reaching each desired object is a reminder of the original lack.

#### 2.4 The Real

The Real is one of the most complex Lacanian terms for it is outside the system of language and can never be fully described. It is one phase of the psychic experience from which the subject is separated, but longs for, after getting in touch with language in the Symbolic order. This is the reason behind the inexpressible nature of the Real, as far as the desire for the Real appears at the moment of the dominance of language and leaving the Imaginary order. Lacan calls the Real the source of utter plenitude, wholeness, unity and fullness and as far as lack or absence does not find a way in the Real, there is no language in the Real (Lacan 1980). The Real always promises a pre-symbolic lost wholeness, and the desire for the Real is the desire for that ultimate object that may finally end our quest to gratify the desire. However, getting too close to the Real might threaten the existing realities and as a result causes anxiety in the subject. Anxiety is brought on by the disappearance of desire.

The Real also represents whatever is rejected, excluded or unjustifiable by the social ideologies. As long as the subject involves himself deeply with various social roles and functions, he falls further from the Real. The time that it becomes aware of the dominance of “words” and “language” over the concepts and realities of the social system, he is experiencing the attachment to the Real. The more subject alienates himself from the social conventions and whatever embraced by the Symbolic order, the more probable will be its contact to the Real.

### 3. Discussion

Nadine Gordimer's *Loot* first published in 2003, is a representation of the unresolved struggle between the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. As a result of the conflict between these three states of psychic experience the main character of the story has desperately retreated into his loneliness. His presence is that of an isolated subject, no more acting in the direction of the social norms, and is unwilling to reproduce the communicative patterns of the society he is at the same time a member of, and isolated from. The man has chosen a self-willed isolation. Having long “divorced”, he is experiencing a lonely life in which he is not “bothered by any [sort of] communication” (Gordimer 2003). His choice of the house indicates the same repulsion in him towards the social involvement as well. He has “chosen an old but well-appointed villa in the maritime hills as the site from which to turn his back on the assault of the city” (5). In search for the reason of this chosen alienation, we encounter a key sentence following the above descriptions of his life style: “It is a life blessedly freed of excitement, he's had enough of that kind of disturbance, pleasurable or not...” (5). This is a reference – although very brief – to the man's past life, and the signs of his present tendency to break away from that experience, whatever it is, and begin a new life surrounded by a new context for reality. The puzzle of his past becomes more complete by an earlier reference to looting shops, “routine to people during the political uprisings” (4) and the phrase near the end of the story which describes the man as a well-known name “in the former regime circles in the capital” (6). Taking into account the fact that the setting of almost all stories in the collection *Loot and other stories* is the post – apartheid south Africa which highlights the new challenges that usually occur in such transitions of political systems, it can be concluded that the protagonist had been an outstanding figure during the apartheid dictatorship and run a busy life, with all the social entanglements associated with power. However, he has decided to take a completely different life style, now that the regime has overthrown (or even may be before that) and therefore retreated to the house on the hill. Alienation is what he seeks – to alienate himself from the tumult that had taken place in his life, and in short, from his own past. The far-fetched house with no one around is a metonymy for this change. Applying the Lacanian psychoanalytic principles in regard with human unconscious, the three major structures of Imaginary, Symbolic and the Real as the controlling forces of our lives and desires and finally the distinction between the “reality” and “the Real” can enhance the reader's understanding of the reasons behind this self-willed change.

According to Lacan, the idea of self is first created through identifications with one's mirror image. In other words, the Mirror stage seems to reflect that “ideal ego” (Lacan 1980), which is in reality a mere illusion to the essentially non-unified self. The child who had believed its body as a part of that of the mother – the desired wholeness – , sees its own picture in the mirror and loses that initial feeling of unity through being fascinated with its own image, which is actually not his real self, but an “other”. As a result, the very first recognition of ego is accompanied with a “lack”, which is separation from mother. This is the beginning of a process which takes long for the whole life: “a deeply buried sense of nostalgia” for that primary completeness and unification on the one hand, and search for the “other” as the vital element for “all future senses of cohesion and stability” (Kemp 2006) on the other hand. The subject in his quest to reach the lost primal illusory oneness desires and contents himself with substitutes and various objects. The story of the narrator within *Loot* is the representation of this quest for self recognition.

He has chosen to take arm against the dominating norms of the Symbolic order – in which he had been a dynamic part – and by seeking to fill the void within him, resulted from the original lack, recognizes a new definition for his human identity.

On the basis of the Lacanian principles, after the experience of loss, the human being enters the Symbolic order which can be described as the set of cultural conventions, social laws, norms and standards which constitutes the whole “reality” of a society. The Symbolic order is governed by the Name-of-the-Father whose function is that of a controlling force and authority that defines the framework of power in every society. The man in the story entered this system and in search for the Real, manifested in Lacan's “object a”, he found himself involved in a chain of signifiers to overcome the void or gap which is created simultaneously as the ego is formed, and to fulfill his desire of the lost object.

Lacan's “object a” is the source of wholeness and its lack causes a dis-unity of self. As a result, there is always the urge in human being to overcome this absence and reach an essential unified and complete self by desiring “object a”.

However, man is ignorant of the fact that “desire will never be satisfied for the simple reason that we speak... inasmuch as we are immersed in the Symbolic world, ... we will never achieve a complete satisfaction of desire, for from here to the full satisfaction of desire, an infinite field constituted by a thousand – and – one labyrinths, spreads out” (Nasio 1998).

In the quest to fulfill his desire, the man had seized different objects, having “a lot of – things” (4), believing each to be the real one. The more he involved himself in the objects of the Symbolic order, the farther he fell from the object of desire. This is what Terry Eagleton (2008) calls the similar schema for “the narrative of everyone’s life”: pursuing substitutes for “a lost paradise in the endless metonymic movement of desire”. Mean while, he had turned to be a prominent figure in the Symbolic order of patriarchal apartheid system, possessed many things that “he probably shouldn’t have acquired” (5) and been even the agent of many political plots and terror, but still with a void in his self. At the end, being aware of his subjective split, he came to experience what Lacan calls “the pain of existing [deouleurd’exister]” (Nasio 1998). In his quest to reach the Real, in his continuous substitution of one signifier (object) for the other, he had incessantly identified himself with each, having been changed with each, to the point that he had lost any fixed and stable identity. Finding out that what he really wants does not exist within the components of the Symbolic order and the logic that dominates it, he “turned his back on the assault of the city”.

The inhabitants of this city - the representatives of the components of the Symbolic order of which he had been a part - are characterized briefly through the features of greed, consumerism, forgetfulness, indifference and selfishness. After the strange earthquake, the people “rushed to take; take, take” (1). The things that are revealed on the ocean bed are the symbols of the desires of the inhabitants of the past ages and the present era: “wrecked ships”, “candelabra”, “pirate chest”, “TV screen”, “swords”, “automatic dishwasher” and many other objects are what the human beings have desired and looked for to possess in their lives. Now, the outcome of all of those sounds and furies is laid still at the depth of the sea. But the citizens of this unnamed city rush to take whatever they can, no matter whether the taken object is useful to them or not: “orgiastic joy gave men, women and their children strength to heave out of the slime and sand what they did not know they wanted” (4).

Being obsessed with self interest is another feature of the looters, “with whom he doesn’t mix” and “has nothing in common” (5). Each overtakes the other in grabbing the objects. The dominant logic is that “if you don’t grab what’s over there someone else will” (4), and as a result the utility of the objects is forgotten through the greed to possess them. Here is an astonishingly true-to-life allegory of the life of human being, a film shown in fast pace: people enter the Symbolic order – the social system – with a split personality resulted from mother separation, and therefore try to overcome this emptiness. They cling to this or that object, experiencing only partial satisfactions which encourage them to move forward, with a faster speed, on the path in the quest of that real satisfaction. According to Freud, this is self-pleasure which is considered to be the essential motivation of all human behavior (Eagleton 2008). However, in the same way that the owners of the objects on the seabed were vanished, taking their unfulfilled desires with them forever, the happy looters are surprised by death which has ambushed for them while they were unaware of its existence: “They had tattered the silence with their shouts to one another and under these cries like the cries of the absent seagulls they did not hear a distant approach of sound rising as a great wind does. And the sea came back, engulfed them to add to its treasury” (4).

Nevertheless, the man who has separated himself from his fellow citizens has reached recognition towards the futility of such tensions. He, who has possessed various things in his life, “unlike others, takes nothing” (5), but passes all in search of a certain object. The object is intentionally not introduced at the beginning and is referred to with terms such as “a certain object”, “the one” and “the *objet*”. This initial intentional hiding of the name of the desired object reinforces Lacan’s description of the object of human desire as unnamable: “Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable. And at the same time this desire lies at the very origin of every variety of animation” (Lacan 1991). Even when the object is explicitly named as a “mirror” it is followed by a question mark, “a mirror?” to convey doubt about the possibility of the certainty over the nature of the lost and consequently desired object.

But why “the mirror” and why beneath “the sea”?

As it is discussed in *A Handbook of critical Approaches to Literature* (2005), Carl Jung (1875-1961) believed that the use of water image and in particular “sea” is widely associated with “human unconscious”. It is “the mother of all life” and can therefore be a good symbol for the universal self or collective unconscious. On the other hand, it is obvious that mirror represents the reflection of the self and therefore stands for self –contemplation. This interpretation is enhanced by remembering the significance of the Lacanian Mirror stage as the very first encounter of the subject with his own self. Besides, the primordial desire to experience a unified self – like what the subject seems to experience as a child during the Mirror stage – is shared by all the species of the human being. It is a desire which resides within the human collective unconscious. That’s why the object (mirror) was hidden “beneath the sea” and why “he didn’t know what it was” and “could never find it before” (5-6). By locating the object at the depth of the sea, the writer tends to emphasize the fact that although the other citizens grasped crazily at this or that object by an “orgiastic joy” new to them, the Real for them and the man - who knows that he needs a certain object - is the same: it is the substitute for the primordial lost object, Lacan’s *objet petit a*, which is the real cause of utter wholeness, true being, presence and in one word essential self (Lacan 1980). This existential quest for the Real is common among human beings and all, consciously or unconsciously, desire it. The fact that the man could not find the object within the context of everyday life is built upon Lacanian acknowledgement of man’s failure to capture the Real after his entrance to the world of meaning through difference, named the Symbolic order. The man had to separate himself from the reality of the Symbolic in order to reach the Real, while the other people desired the belongings of the Symbolic, as far as their limited world view was

shaped through the symbolic construction of reality. In addition, the Real was made accessible to the man through an earthquake. If we consider earthquake a change in the stable rhythm of life, or more symbolically, a change in the way we view the world and its events, the man reaches a perception of his unconscious desire – self-completion – when isolation from the fixed framework of the Symbolic provides him with a bare view of his unconscious.

However, the price that he and other citizens paid for this unique show of the unconscious, not available in ordinary situations, was death: “And the Great wave comes from behind his bed-head and takes him”. This tragic end for the quest can be justified best by reference to Slavoj Žižek’s (b. 1949) description of the subject’s encounter with the Real. Žižek, the well-known Lacanian theorist believes that the subject might take two distinct reactions towards the Real and the inner desire to reach it. One strategy is to consider the full contact to Real as a danger to one’s being. Being immersed in the Real may destroy one’s life, because it destabilizes the framework by which his subjectivity is constructed through. Being obsessed with the Real threatens one’s being-in-the-world existence and as a result destroys him: “we either posit the void [void of the Real] as the impossible – real limit of the human experience that we can approach only indefinitely, the absolute thing toward which we have to maintain a proper distance – if we get too close to it we get burned by the sun” (Žižek 2003).

Another strategy is to risk losing everything one feels within his subjectivity. Being prepared enough to confront the emptiness and lack of all desires and dependencies, one may be able to pass this stage and begin constructing a new subjectivity: “In order for (symbolic) creation to take place, the death drive has to accomplish its work of, precisely, emptying the place, and thus making it ready for creation” (Žižek 2003).

The man of the story did not stand this naked reality of the self. He got too close to what he had desired and as a result jouissance – the consequent intense enjoyment of the illusory promise of the full realization of the desire (Nasio 1998) – did not last long. What he deserved at the end reminds us of Oedipus’ fate: to know one’s self is to be destroyed.

The futility of all desires is generalized by the looters being drowned all after the objects of desire were unraveled in their residue at the depth of their collective unconscious. The underlying pessimistic picture of the psychological tensions of man’s life that Gordimer provides us with, finds a more universal scope in the last paragraphs of the story: “Along with him among the skeletons of the later victims, with the ancient pirates and fishermen, there are those dropped from planes during the dictatorship so that with the accomplice of the sea they would never be found”. This is the tragedy of the human desires and dreams. The same fate waits for all the ordinary citizens, the former dictators, the victims of fight against apartheid system and the ambitious pirates finally overcome by death. The unconscious devours the objects of desire and their owners, and itself remains the only domineering existence of this vast scene of human life.

Another unconscious favorite by a Lacanian critic is the text’s unconscious. Eagleton (2008) clarifies the significance of the study of the ambiguities of the work in psychoanalytical criticism through the following sentences: “The work’s insights, as with all writing, are deeply related to its blindness: what it does not say, and how it does not say it, may be as important as what it articulates; what seems absent, marginal or ambivalent about it may provide a central clue to its meanings”. If language is the featuring code of the Symbolic order, the writer deviates from the rules of the standard language and narration in order to put aside the formalities of the Symbolic logic and delves at the depth of human unconscious.

The way Gordimer manipulates language and the verbal hardening of her fiction has made reading her works a hard working task being fulfilled simply through spending time and care. Her refusal to obey the rules of punctuation is manifested through various examples in *Loot*; she refuses to use full stop marks in the whole paragraph that introduces the man (4-5). Her strange locating of “=” within the text in order to show the two terms “past – detritus” and “treasure” as synonymous in the statement “the past – detritus = treasure, one and the same – stripped bare” lengthens the process of comprehension. The division of the story into two distinct but related narratives is another technique. The first part gives a general overview of the society and the citizens’ manner and attitude and in one word the Symbolic order. The second part, however, is the focus of the writer’s imagination on a particular member of this society who has chosen to manage a different life. The use of various figures of speech such as symbolism, personification and allusion contributes to the hidden aspect of the work as well. Gordimer’s narrator moves beyond the accepted rules of language and the standard manner of storytelling and in this way attracts the attention of the reader into what the text really means but does not say: the unconscious of the text.

#### 4. Conclusion

The psychological approach to fiction enhances our understanding of the characters’ minds, motivations and reactions. Beneath the surface of *Loot* by Nadine Gordimer lies a great deal of revelations to justify the events, actions and the final fate of the characters. It pictures the Lacanian principles of individual growth and the character’s experiences of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.

As the result of this study, the quest of the human being to possess things and his competition to overtake others in this game is interpreted through the Lacanian view of the human psyche. While the Real’s illusory promise of complete self invoked the man to rush towards the uncovered seabed, the other citizens search their desired lost objects in the same place. Finally, they share the same fate: death possesses all and the desire to reach the Real is buried with them at the depth of water.

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