

# Acquiescence and Resistance in the Fiction of Nadine Gordimer

A Thesis

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## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Nadine Gordimer's fiction of the apartheid period (1948-1994) presents different kinds of acquiescence and resistance. Gordimer's characters live in a world governed by apartheid laws such as Group Areas Act segregating the white residential areas from the locations of the black residents, and Population Registration Act dividing the people into different racial categories. While some characters in her fiction are acquiescent to apartheid, most of the protagonists of her novels show their resistance to apartheid. She presents the theme of resistance in her novels and short stories through a focus on the physical and psychological barriers the characters face in their lives. Helen Shaw, the protagonist of Gordimer's first novel, *The Lying Days*, goes against the conventional social norms and befriends a black female student, Mary Seswayo. She even unsuccessfully tries to provide the student a living space. The novel depicts the growth of Helen's consciousness. She crosses over to prohibited spaces such as her visit to the Concession stores in the Mine, which the black mine workers use. Another important spatial image is that of the Mariastad location, the township which Helen visits along with Mary (*LD* 171). The township gives the impression of disorder and incoherence. But the many voices of it coalesce into a single shout which gives coherence to the seemingly incoherent space. As Helen and Charles reach the township, they stopped talking, suggesting their awareness of the white complicity in the repression of the blacks. Gordimer's description of this township may be said to be an early version of heterotopia –a site of difference and resistance –which is further elaborated in the township description in *Burger's Daughter*. Control over space has been a mechanism to dominate the majority South Africans. Helen Shaw has a desire to move beyond the spatial boundaries. She, however, fails and decides to leave South Africa. The apartheid government rule through what Foucault called classification of the population into different categories and segregating them to different social spaces.

In her fiction Gordimer explores the theme of borderlines, the locations of cultures. In Gordimer's second novel, *A World of Strangers*, division of the population is more prominent. Toby Hood intends to remain neutral to the politics of South Africa and visits both the white and the black South African society, making friends across racial divide. His friend Anna Louw, an

Afrikaner lawyer and activist introduces him to a party of mixed races –a world in which people of different races come together and become friends. Toby finds the party remarkable with its “ordinary pattern” of people of different races, symbolizing in its composition an “Oriental rug” (WS 84). But soon Toby finds that the divide between the whites and the blacks is deep and that it is irreconcilable. The binary divisions develop in him a sense of despondency and alienation. Toby finds himself an ‘in-between’ reality, a borderline existence (Bhaba, 19). Gordimer suggests that meetings of this kind are the borderlines or locations of culture. They are the spaces which act like a bridge to connect white and black people. People in these gatherings develop an intimacy, though temporary. Their intimacy questions the binary divisions of the South African society where apartheid created multiple identities. Gordimer employs the idea of ‘borderline’ that provides her with a space to resist the rigid boundaries of the contemporary society. She has made use of this marginal space as a site for her creative writing. In an Interview with Studs Terkel, Gordimer says,

“I’ve written usually about the borderland, the kind of frontier where black and white do meet, to a certain extent, and more or less as equals, though you can never be equal in an unequal society . . . but anyway, I have dealt mostly with this kind of half world where people do meet –black and white . . . (Terkel 19).

Borderline situations and encounters between the black and the white are important themes that pervade Gordimer’s novels and short stories of the apartheid period. Thus, the action of the story, “Which New Era Would That Be?” may be said to develop in a borderland where the white and the black characters meet each other. The coloured man, Jake Alexander’s printing shop housed in the ‘New Era Building’ is visited by young men and women across colour bar. Through the story Gordimer captures the mood of life in Johannesburg in the 1950s. Jake, his group of five men and his white friends Alister Halford and Jennifer Tetzl flouts the rules of racial segregation. Alister often accompanies Jake to visit the shebeens in a coloured location, which is prohibited for a white person. Jake and his black friends are, however, critical of the progressive attitude of the liberal whites. They think that the whites cannot identify with the black and that they cannot feel the humiliation of the black man walking in the streets with a pass given by the white (SS 74). Jake’s attitude to Jennifer reminds one of Gordimer’s own paradoxical position as a white writer. The confrontation between Rosa and Baasie in *Burger’s Daughter* epitomises the oppression of the blacks and their rejection of the whites’ collaboration in their struggle for liberation. The accusation of Baasie reflects the accusations of the Black Consciousness movement. Gordimer

allows Baasie to speak in his own voice. This voice is also echoed earlier in the novel by the young black, Duma Dhladhla who rejects the class analysis of South Africa offered by the communist Orde Greer. As Rosa recalls the devastating telephone conversation with Baasie she feels an overwhelming awareness of commitment to the cause of the blacks. The midnight telephone call is a turning point in Rosa's life, and the scene is pivotal in the fiction of Gordimer. While talking about the future of the whites in South Africa, she expresses her own position as a white writer in her essay, "Where Do Whites Fit In?": "I myself fluctuate between the desire to be gone –to find a society for myself where my white skin will have no bearing on my place in the community – and a terrible, obstinate and fearful desire to stay. I feel the one desire with my head and the other with gut"(Gordimer 34). Despite conflicting desires of staying and leaving, she remained true to her desire to stay. Many of her fictional characters show the same fluctuation. Rosa Burger in *Burger's Daughter* is one such character who attempts to escape in order to assert her identity but finally commits to the cause of South African national liberation.

Indeed, Gordimer has all along shown the same commitment. She publishes her novels though she knows they may be banned or she may be put under house arrest. This shows her willingness to accept arrest or even imprisonment. Hence, it is untenable that writing has been a kind of luxurious irrelevance to Gordimer because she herself was a white. Her fiction of the 1970s, particularly *Burger's Daughter*, is Gordimer's response to the Black Consciousness movement. It is an examination of white South African psyche. In the given racial privilege, the way forward for the white lies in their radical self-examination and their relation to the blacks under the changing conditions. They must help and learn to walk together, putting one foot before the other and build a nation based on non-racialism.

Gordimer's characters often find themselves at the border or at the margin where past and present, inside and outside are not separated as binary opposites but they commingle and conflict. And from this emerge new and complex forms of representation that defy binary division. Through the imaginative border-crossings in her fiction, Gordimer suggests the possibility of psychological and physical crossing of borders. After returning to South Africa, Rosa renews her contact with Marisa Kgosana and other black activists at Soweto. She is imprisoned with other women revolutionaries. She lives in the prison with Marisa, Clare and the Indian woman, establishing a kind of sisterhood. Gordimer seems to convey the establishment of the symbolic contact of black and white suggesting the creation of a community out of differences –the many into one. The

resistance acts of blacks and Rosa's arrest for her co-operation with the black rebels may be said to constitute what Bhabha called the performative aspect of nationalism. In the context of apartheid South Africa, a national culture must be built through repeated performances of acts of co-operation and acknowledgement of the leadership of the blacks by the whites. In her essay, "Living in the Interregnum", Gordimer says that whites should find their own forms of struggle (267). Rosa's act of joining the Soweto revolt under the black leadership reflects this commitment of Gordimer. Through Rosa's subordinate position in the revolt, Gordimer suggests that the white must take such a position to overthrow apartheid. Gordimer continues to examine the cross-racial relationship by reversing the master-servant relation in *July's People* which is a fictionalized version of the "interregnum" that she talks about in her essay, "Living in the Interregnum".

Life in a borderline situation often causes a feeling of alienation. Toby moves between the rich white society and the poor black world and discovers a void that exists in them. Toby's experiences at the High Houses and the black townships exert a pressure on him. Finally, the death of his black friend, Steven Sitole opens his eyes how deeply the apartheid was entrenched in South African society. He realises that both white and black might live side by side in South Africa but they are strangers in each other's world. However, Gordimer represents the character of Steven in a way that challenges the apartheid regime in South Africa. Steven has built a network of contacts which helps him avoid the restrictions imposed by adverse legislation: "The more restrictions grew up around him and his kind –and there seemed to be fresh ones every month – the quicker he found a way round him" (WS 204). He breaks or moves beyond the boundaries created by apartheid policies and practices. By avoiding the legislations, Steven offers a site of individual resistance that links with a broader movement which can generate practical resistance. Thus, Gordimer shows a possibility of change in the South African society divided into groups and zones under the apartheid regime. Many of her characters move 'beyond' the barriers and return. But they return with some change –with a sense of commitment to challenge the rigid boundaries of South Africa. Toby's acquaintances with white and black worlds and his failure in personal relationships across colour bar make him feel the necessity of a commitment to the resistance against apartheid. This time he makes the commitment to another black, Sam Mofokenzazi. Just before leaving the Johannesburg railway station for Cape Town in business trip, Toby promises Sam to be the godfather of Sam's baby when it is born. Gordimer seems to suggest that their friendship transcends all ideologies and signals the beginning of a cultural

synthesis against the apartheid. In *The Late Bourgeois World*, Elisabeth almost commits herself to help Luke and thinks of using the bank account of her grandmother to transfer funds from abroad. The decision of helping the underground rebels frightens her though. Her heart beats: “afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive”(LBW 142). She finds the possibility of joining hands with the underground black politics when the world of the white liberals and its values reached almost an end. By crossing the barriers –both physical and psychological –Gordimer’s characters such as Toby and Elisabeth discover their alienation and marginal positions in the South African society. This made them live through the conflicting pulls and pushes of their will and their society. And thus the history of the time comes alive through their life. However, there are flawed characters in terms of resistance against apartheid in the fiction of Gordimer. Unlike the committed Anna Louw who is arrested on treason charges, Cecil Rowe is a typical white woman with racial prejudice. Ann Davis in *Occasion for Love* shows a tendency to move beyond the colour bar in her affair with Gideon Shibalo but finally she falls back on apartheid.

The power relations in a society influence the construction of its individuals. In South Africa, the politics of apartheid, especially the Immorality Act, 1950 partially accounts for the failure of the cross-racial relationship of Ann and Gideon. In other words, apartheid or the ideology of racial segregation has been internalized by the white Ann. In the beginning, Ann did not care for the restrictions imposed by apartheid. But later the dominant laws and cultural conventions of society influenced her and so she left South Africa without even saying good bye to Gideon. Like Foucault, Gordimer seems to consider sexuality as a site of power relations governed by the dominant socio-cultural conventions. She has attempted to produce an alternative discourse about sexuality in *Occasion for Loving* and in the subsequent novels. The prevailing cross-racial sexual relationship in the colonial South Africa had been between white men and black women (Thompson 45). But Gordimer has depicted in her fiction the trans-racial relationship between black men and white women. By reversing the traditional pattern, she has suggested the possibility of resisting the apartheid ideology. Many of her characters disregard the myth of miscegenation, posing a challenge to a fundamental principle of the apartheid ideology. Thus, Gordimer begins a discourse what may be called, in Foucault’s words, “a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (*The History*, 101). Gordimer wants to resist and problematises the existing discourse of sexuality. Like Foucault, she also believes that sex and politics are intertwined because sex often functions as a controlling force in politics. The black artist Gideon’s affair with

Ann may be seen as a transgression of the socio-cultural practices and a resistance to apartheid. In this act Jessie is a co-actor because she endorses the affair. But the fear of dominant discourses overtakes Ann and she leaves Gideon. Ann's affair, though temporary, is a very significant act of resistance. It nevertheless shows how it affects the consciousness of the individuals. This act of resistance, whether failed or otherwise, may be said to prepare the ground for emergence of resistance in future. This is clearly visible in her later fiction such as *A Sport of Nature* and *My Son's Story*.

Feminist critics often find fault with Gordimer's treatment of gender in her fiction. She has, they allege, preferred to focus on the issue of racism without linking it to sexism. She has considered gender issues as part of human rights in any society. In the Introduction to *Selected Stories* she has admitted that she, as an adolescent, had a genuine connection with the social life of the town [Springs] through her femaleness (3). She finds this social perception valid throughout her life. This may be validated by *A Sport of Nature*, where Hillela through sexuality frees herself from the restrictions of race. She seems to suggest that sexuality or femininity is a liberating force. In creating Hillela, Gordimer has envisioned a "new white person" who can move beyond the barriers of apartheid (Knox 71). This vision of the new white person is not simple though. Hillela has to struggle and move beyond her romantic relationship with Whaila after his assassination. She takes up different roles in the struggle against apartheid. After Whaila, she marries Reuel, another black African leader. She has been depicted as a resourceful woman –a "mistress of adaptation" (SN 393). She can assert herself in the changing circumstances of power as one of the three wives of Reuel. Like Whaila, Reuel admires her powers of invention. "Hillela has not been taken in by this African family; she has disposed it around her. Hers is the non-matrilineal centre that no one resents because no one has known it could exist. She has invented it. This is not the rainbow family" (SN 393). Though Gordimer does not clearly define Hillela's invention, she suggests a more complex vision by moving beyond the romantic idea of racial communion through sexual relationship. Hillela remains committed to resistance against apartheid. Her story dominates the action. The novel ends in a future moment beyond. In the final scene of the novel, Hillela returns to South Africa only after the revolution is over. She sees the flag of Whaila's country fly. Thus, through culmination of Hillela and Whaila's love, Gordimer resolves the impasse between blacks and whites as depicted in *July's People*. In Gordimer's evolving vision of South Africa,

white women can freely choose black men as beloved and these cross-racial couples represent some hope in the struggle for a multiracial nation.

It is difficult to separate Gordimer's use of sexuality from the issues of gender representation, particularly in her later novels. In fact, she has represented sexuality in a way to empower woman. And Gordimer seems to move closer to a revolutionary vision that encompasses feminism. She has addressed the gender issue through her own brand of micropolitics or politics of the body. In her later novels, particularly in *My Son's Story*, Gordimer has shown how politics centres on male and female bodies. In fact, she has sexualized politics in the sense that politics and sexuality are shown closely linked in the contemporary South African political condition. The relationship between Sonny and his white lover epitomises the commitment to political struggle and the fascination of sexual love. Sonny discovers a new meaning of life through his relationship with Hannah. She becomes the centre of his commitment to political struggle and sexual pleasure as well. Sonny and Hannah represent the meeting point of politics and sexuality in South Africa of late 1980s. As the narrator claims, "South Africa is a centripetal force that draws people not only out of economic necessity, but also out of the fascination of commitment to political struggle" (MSS 88). Sonny has displayed strong masculine sexuality in his affair with Hannah. But his virility collapses in his relationship with wife Aila. Through the triangular relationship between Sonny, Aila and Hannah, Gordimer perhaps explores the possibility of a political role for women in South Africa under and beyond apartheid. In the first part of the novel, Aila is seen as a traditional woman. But later she turns a revolutionary and establishes her new identity. Though she does not completely shed her old identity, she transcends her past and achieves a new cultural identity, combining the conventional and the subversive.

The transformation of Aila and her daughter Baby represent the political climate of the anti-apartheid movements in South Africa in the 1980s. In the 1960s, political organizations and activists opposing the apartheid regime were banned. Consequently most of the opposition forces went underground. They realized that passive resistance could not match the brutal state suppression and therefore they became radical and more subversive. Aila's subtle shift from the domestic space into the space of violent resistance reflects this political condition of South Africa of the time. In Aila, Gordimer has created an independent personality who is beyond the power and perception of such a clever revolutionary as Sonny. She distances herself from her son and husband, and asserts her new identity. Once marginalized and even silenced, she now occupies



the central position in the family and politics as well. In other words, she achieves new roles and authority in the politics of the family and in the liberation struggle. In creating Aila's new hybrid identity of race and cultural mix, Gordimer breaks down the traditional category of race and above all gender.

In the earlier works of Gordimer, black or coloured women have little voice or have been marginalized as that was their socio-political position. Almost all the white heroines of Gordimer develop political consciousness and dominate the narrative. But the black women remain marginalized. Thus, Hillela fights against the apartheid government. And in the process, she marginalizes or even silences the black women. On the other hand, Aila in *My Son's Story* emerges with a new role and identity as a secret political agent against the backdrop of sexual and political relationship of her husband and his lover. Aila is still silence. But in the changing situation, her silence is invested with different meanings. Gordimer suggests through Aila the possibility for women to liberate themselves through political struggle. In her creating a new model of female subjectivity, Gordimer seems to re-evaluate feminism in the apartheid South Africa by exploring the possible role for women in the liberation struggle of the country. This is, perhaps, why the later fiction such as *My Son's Story* and *None to Accompany* shows the female characters playing central and political roles as revolutionaries and thereby subverting the negative images of women as marginalized victims of their society.

Gordimer has been an unwavering critic of apartheid. As an activist and a committed artist, she has created characters and built plots that often defy the strict categorization of the population into white, black and/or coloured. This creates space for the characters to see beyond their particular identity and discover a perspective upon themselves and the South African life. The fiction of Gordimer demonstrates a texture that allows one to analyse the theme of resistance through the concepts such as space and borderline. Through the actions and characters of her fiction, Gordimer builds a pattern of resistance to apartheid. The earlier novels reflect the passive resistance through such liberal characters as Toby Hood and Elisabeth. The later fiction Gordimer depicts the active, radical movements against the apartheid. In fact, Gordimer's fiction from *The Conservationist* onwards is concerned with the future and uncertain phase of South African history. Thus, both *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* deal with the imminent revolutions in South Africa which culminated in the 1994 General Election. While focusing on the issues of future of South Africa, Gordimer engages with more radicalized political themes.

There are in the fiction of Gordimer contrasting characters and scenes. Even the major characters may offer contrasting interpretations. There are also implied subtexts such as the paintings Rosa views in France, which may lend to different interpretations and perspectives. This is true about all great artists including Shakespeare. Nadine Gordimer delineates the trials and tribulations of life in South Africa under apartheid. At the same time she has shown the possibility of defeating the evils of racism which is a major factor of the apartheid ideology. Themes and problems of racial discrimination and power struggle have a universal significance. This thesis makes innovative contribution to resistance literature by examining apartheid and its resistance in the fiction of Gordimer. It remains to be seen how she has delineated in her fiction the South African life of the post-apartheid period. This may be a subject of another study.

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