

Acquiescence and Resistance in the fiction of Nadine Gordimer

Abstract

This thesis undertakes to examine the theme of acquiescence and resistance in Nadine Gordimer's fiction of the apartheid era in South Africa. The Afrikaner National Party came to power in South Africa in 1948. Since then successive white minority governments of South Africa had enacted and implemented apartheid laws to dominate and rule the majority black population. Thus, for instance, the Group Areas Act (1950) divided urban areas in a way that designated separate black and white neighbourhoods. On the other hand, cultural and social activists and different organizations like the African National Congress (ANC) started opposing the apartheid system that divided the society racially. Alongside blacks, many white liberals fought against the apartheid regime. Nadine Gordimer is one such white author and activist who has been a bitter critic of apartheid throughout her life. As an artist who is deeply committed to society, she has created a body of fiction that displays a culture of resistance to the dehumanizing apartheid laws. Her early fiction such as *The Lying Days* (1953), *A World of Strangers* (1958) and *Occasion for Loving* (1963) portrays characters of liberal whites who unsuccessfully attempt to cross the racial barriers and thereby pose a challenge to apartheid laws. But after their failure, there is a change in their attitude to life and society. After the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the anti-apartheid movements became violent and subversive. Gordimer's novels such as *Burger's Daughter* (1979), *July's People* (1981) and *My Son's Story* (1990) are concerned with liberation struggle of the South African blacks. Gordimer's fiction reveals her concern and sympathy for the resistance movements against apartheid in South Africa.

Gordimer has not only highlighted the issue of apartheid but she has expressed her voice of dissent through her work –both fictional and non-fictional. This study argues that Gordimer has provided through her work an alternative discourse to resist apartheid. She has proposed in her fiction the alternative discourse through her treatment of space,

interracial sexual relationship and life in borderline situation in the apartheid South Africa. The argument of the thesis is developed through a textual analysis of Gordimer's fiction in the light of postcolonial theories as forwarded by Michel Foucault and Homi K. Bhabha. In his books, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, Foucault has given a powerful account of the significant connections between power, knowledge, and discourse. He claims that power is exercised rather than possessed. He further argues that power is productive and that subjects are produced through cultural and institutional practices. He mainly focuses on practices of disciplinary power which lead to binary divisions such as sane/mad and which can be used as a means of social control. These divisions also involve the physical segregation of the population in a society. Such divisions of population are clearly found in the ideological practices of apartheid in South Africa. Gordimer has shown in her fiction such as *A World of Strangers* how the apartheid regime segregated whites from blacks by assigning them different geographical areas. On the other hand, Foucault suggests, where there is power, there is resistance. He admits the existence of state power but at the same time he points out the possibility of resistance to the centralized power at the micro level – power relations in the lives of individuals. Many fictional characters of Gordimer demonstrate resistance at the micro level. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha examines issues such as 'borderline', cultural difference and colonial oppression which can be used to analyse Gordimer's fiction and resistance against apartheid. Bhabha argues that borderlines are locations of culture. They are transitory locations from where one thinks of moving beyond a barrier. The border disturbs the conventional patterns. On the other hand, it is also the place of possible new ideas. Gordimer's characters attempt to cross the borderlines and show the possibility of a change. The characters of her fiction demonstrate transition from liberal to radical stance in their struggle against apartheid as in *The Late Bourgeois World*, and in breaking the barriers of the compartmentalized South African society as in *Burger's Daughter*. She explores the physical and psychological relationships among the characters in her fiction and shows how power governs the racial and gender relations in the apartheid South Africa. Gordimer's major works of the apartheid period are

discussed in the context of the troubled historical past of South Africa in the light of the postcolonial critics, Bhabha and Foucault.

The thesis is organized into five chapters preceded by a short introduction. The first chapter contextualizes the fiction of Nadine Gordimer through an introduction to the reflection of anti-apartheid movements in the South African novels in English. The second chapter examines the theme of acquiescence and resistance in Gordimer's fiction of the apartheid period. Apartheid has caused traumatic experiences to several generations of South Africans. The third chapter critically analyses three of Gordimer's novels in the light of trauma studies. The fourth chapter explores Gordimer's treatment of gender in her fiction. The fifth chapter is a conclusion of the study highlighting how Gordimer shows her resistance through her treatment of space, trans-racial sexual relationship and life in borderline situation.

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 apartheid. 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.