

INTRODUCTION

This study entitled “Acquiescence and Resistance in the Fiction of Nadine Gordimer” attempts to explore the theme of acquiescence and resistance to apartheid in South Africa in the fiction of Nadine Gordimer. Apartheid had been a political programme of separate development for different races in South Africa. Though apparently there was nothing objectionable in this programme, it was actually used by the successive white governments to dominate and oppress the South African blacks. Apartheid may be said to have begun with the Land Act of 1913. However, its institutionalisation began in 1948 when the Afrikaner National Party came to power. Various laws were enacted and implemented to continue the rule of the minority whites over the majority people through racial segregation of the people into different races: white, coloured, Asian and black¹. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Act (1950) made marriages and sexual relations between black and white South Africans illegal. The Group Areas Act (1950) divided urban areas in a way that designated separate black and white neighbourhoods. The Pass Laws (1952) forced the black South Africans to carry a pass-book that allowed them to work or remain in white areas. On the other hand, cultural and social activists and different organisations like the African National Congress (ANC) started opposing the apartheid ideology. Alongside blacks, many white liberals fought against the apartheid regime. Gordimer is one such liberal white. The resistance was passive in the beginning. But after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the resistance movements became violent. It continued till the first free general election in 1994, which elected Nelson Mandela as the President of the nation.

Nadine Gordimer (1923 – 2014) has been a significant voice of resistance in the cultural history of South Africa. Her fiction has been widely acknowledged as the imaginative records of the apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. With her artistic mind and deep commitment to society, she has created a body of fiction that displays a culture of resistance to the dehumanising apartheid laws. Gordimer is often considered as the greatest contributor to white protest literature in South Africa and hence her unique place in the South African literature. She carries forward the tradition of Olive Schreiner, William Plomer and Alan Paton. Apartheid and the anti-apartheid movements made a great impact on the lives of the characters of Gordimer’s fiction. Her early fiction such as

The Lying Days (1953), *A World of Strangers* (1958), *Occasion for Loving* (1963) and the short story collection *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (1953) portrays characters of liberal whites who attempt to cross the racial barriers and thereby posed a challenge to apartheid laws. They were unsuccessful but their failure brings about certain changes in their attitude to life and society. These novels capture the mood of the 1950s when the resistance movements were largely passive. Resistance was limited to mixed gatherings and relationships across the colour bar. This social structure is clearly visible in *A World of Strangers* and *Occasion for Loving*.

The Sharpeville massacre (1960) is a watershed moment in the history of South Africa. It marked a change in the anti-apartheid struggle and a change in Gordimer's approach. The government declared a state of emergency in South Africa. The ANC and its broke away faction, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned. They went underground and adopted violent and subversive actions. The ANC under the leadership of Mandela formed its guerrilla armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (meaning 'spear of the nation') and the PAC formed its armed wing called Poqo (meaning pure or alone). Gordimer captures in her fiction the transition of the passive liberation struggle to a violent resistance movement. Her 1966 novel *The Late Bourgeois World* is fictional version of this transition. The underground liberation struggle forms the theme of *July's People* (1981) and *A Sport of Nature* (1987). These works reveal Gordimer's concern and sympathy for the resistance movements against apartheid in South Africa. 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.

Through her writings Gordimer has fought against the injustice and oppression practised by the race she belonged to, and this makes her position very difficult. She has been sometimes criticised for being white – particularly in the 1970s, the decade of the rise of the Black Consciousness movement. The black leaders like Steve Biko wanted to fight their battle on their own and exclude the whites in their fight against the apartheid regime. *Burger's Daughter* (1979), written against the backdrop of the Soweto uprising, is Gordimer's response to the Black Consciousness movement. It has been alleged that Gordimer, being a white, cannot tell the story of a black as she lacks the direct experiences of such a life. Gordimer repudiates such accusations. She argues that the

blacks know about some aspects of the life of the whites and the same is true about the whites. She has dealt with black and coloured characters, particularly in her later novels like *July's People* and *My Son's Story* (1990). With her high imaginative faculty she could slip inside a life which is different from hers. As a writer she considers it her responsibility to explore life and culture beyond borders.

Gordimer has gained a lot of critical attention over the years. Previous scholars have examined her work in one of the two ways: they have found her work as revealing a tension between the private and the public life, or as a fictional expression of the political or historical conditions of the time. In his 1974 book, *Nadine Gordimer*, Robert F. Haugh argues that Gordimer's talent lay in her short stories where she focuses on private relationships. Her interest in public issues, Haugh believes, leads her to writing novels, where she tries to integrate the personal with the political. The dichotomy of public and private themes is dealt in John Cooke's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (1985). He approaches Gordimer's fiction from the perspectives of landscapes on which her novels revolve. Cooke emphasizes the decisive influence of Gordimer's unusual childhood on her work and suggests that the novelist has endowed her private history with public associations.

Michael Wade, on the other hand, analyses the fiction of Gordimer in the political and historical contexts. In his book, *Nadine Gordimer* (1978), Wade examines the development of Gordimer's political ideas, mainly through her novels. However, Stephen Clingman's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986) is the most informative and valuable study on Gordimer as a novelist and thinker. Clingman traces Gordimer's developing consciousness of history through her novels. Contextualized in the political and intellectual developments of the time, the book offers a close analysis of the novels. Clingman locates the process of historical change in the lives of Gordimer's characters and presents a view of 'history from inside'. Clingman also edited a selection of Gordimer's essays titled *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. His introductions to the essays usefully situate the essays in their historical context. Dominic Head's *Nadine Gordimer* (1994) offers a comprehensive study of the oeuvre of the author. Instead of considering only the political and historical dimension of Gordimer's fiction, he has focused on the textual politics and the craft of the author. He highlights Gordimer's complex relation to African culture and European

literary form and politics of space. Judie Newman's *Nadine Gordimer* (1988) examines how the issue of gender complicates the themes of race and colonialism in the novels of Gordimer. She has shown how in Gordimer's fiction the interaction of private and public, the complex connection between psychological and political, draws upon an awareness of the relation between genre and gender. In addition to these major approaches to the fiction of Gordimer, some other scholars also have made significant contribution to the critical studies of Gordimer. Rowland Smith, Dorothy Driver, Abdul R. JanMohamed, Susan Gardner, Louise Yelin, Martin Trump and Karen Lazar are most notable among them.

However, none of these scholars have fully examined the theme of acquiescence and resistance in the fiction of Gordimer. The present study proposes to fill this gap. Though the study often refers to the historical contexts of Gordimer's work, it focuses mainly on her response to apartheid. She has demonstrated in her work –both fictional and non-fictional –that apartheid affects every aspects of life in South Africa. She has explored in her writings the social and psychological relationships and how they are governed by race, sex and gender. Gordimer has not only highlighted the issue of apartheid but she has opposed it as well. The present study examines how Gordimer has used her writing as a tool of resistance against the apartheid regime of South Africa. The thesis 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, sexual relationship and life in borderline situation in the apartheid South Africa. A recurrent theme in her fiction is the inter-racial relationship which challenges the basic principle of apartheid. This thesis attempts to show how the concepts of space, power, and borderline function in South Africa in the context of apartheid and how Gordimer used them to develop the theme of acquiescence and resistance in her fiction.

The argument of the thesis is developed through a critical analysis of Gordimer's fiction of the apartheid period (1948-1994) in the light of postcolonial theories of Michel Foucault and Homi K Bhabha. In his path breaking book *Orientalism*, Edward Said very persuasively argues that the western scholars should reconsider the relationship between the West and the Orient. He contended that the image of the east as savage and

underdeveloped was constructed by the Europe. “Europe saw the Orient as different and treated this difference as *negative*,” argues Said (original italics, Nayar 161). Said’s argument about the power of orientalist discourse to construct the orient is based on the Foucauldian premise of power and knowledge. The west had power to know the orient and that power constituted the oriental other as a particular subject of discourse. 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 the subject in his writings. He claims that power is exercised rather than possessed (*Discipline and Punish* 26). The history of different social institutions is the history of power relations. Knowledge gives rise to power. It is the power-knowledge relationship which controls and governs the society. 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. Apartheid operated through what Foucault calls classification and surveillance. Control over space is a mechanism to dominate the people. 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 centralised power at the micro level –power relations in the lives of individuals. Many fictional characters of Gordimer demonstrate resistance at the micro level.

In his influential book, *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. He considers postcoloniality as a continuity of the past and not as break from the past (6-7). Apartheid may also be said to be a continuity of the social structure created by the colonial powers. Bhabha argues that borderlines are locations for culture. They are transitory locations from where one thinks of moving beyond a barrier. Bhabha describes the border as beyond or liminal. As he puts it, “The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a living behind of the past . . . we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time

cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (1-2). 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 compartmentalised South African society as in *Burger’s Daughter*. The major works of Gordimer are discussed in the context of the troubled historical past of South Africa in the light of the postcolonial critics Bhabha and Foucault.

As for the scope of this study, it discusses the novels and short stories of Gordimer written during the apartheid regime. It also draws on the essays and interviews in order to give a more comprehensive view of Gordimer’s work and thought. However, the novel, *A Guest of Honour* published in 1971 has not been discussed in this study. This novel is set in an unnamed African country that has been liberated from the colonial rule. In that sense it depicts a post-apartheid society. Some important short stories of this period has also been analysed to illustrate the theme of acquiescence and resistance in the fiction of Gordimer.

The thesis comprises five chapters preceded by an introduction. The first chapter discusses the theme of apartheid and anti-apartheid as reflected in the South African novels in English in the second half of the twentieth century. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to apartheid in South Africa, which is followed by a discussion of the notable novelists –both blacks and whites –of the apartheid era. The novels of the black writers like Es’kia Mphahlele and Alex La Guma are concerned with the sufferings under apartheid and awakening the mind of the South African blacks. Through their works the white novelists reveal their opposition to the indignity and persecution suffered by their fellowmen. By doing so, they urge upon the reader to oppose apartheid. This chapter is intended to contextualise the fiction of Nadine Gordimer.

The second chapter examines the theme of acquiescence and resistance in Nadine Gordimer’s fiction of the apartheid period. The chapter begins with a discussion of Postcolonialism as forwarded by Edward Said, Michel Foucault and Homi K. Bhabha. After discussing Gordimer’s views on the writer’s responsibility to her/his society as

expressed in her fictional and non-fictional prose, the chapter analyses the fiction of Gordimer employing postcolonial concepts such as 'space' (Foucault) and 'borderline' (Bhabha). As an avowed critic of apartheid, Gordimer creates men and women who often reject racism. Her early novels reveal the inadequacy of the white liberals to resist the apartheid regime. As the fight against apartheid became violent in 1960s onward, her fiction also depicted the violent and subversive activities carried out to resist oppressive system. The chapter attempts to show how Gordimer has tried to suggest an alternative discourse through her treatment of space, sex and life in borderline situation.

Chapter three focuses on the trauma studies with reference to three novels of Gordimer. The history of apartheid in South Africa has been traumatic, to say the least. Apartheid has caused the collective trauma of several generations. Cyrulnik, a French psychiatrist argues that trauma is a kind of interplay between the past and the present and this interplay may open up the possibility of generating resilience or the capacity of a person to recover from trauma. Narrative can play a role in developing resilience. Following this argument, this chapter discusses Nadine Gordimer's novels such as *Occasion for Loving* and *My Son's Story*.

The fourth chapter concentrates on Nadine Gordimer's treatment of gender or sexual politics in her fiction. Gordimer is best known in the South African cultural history for her depiction of the contemporary socio-political conditions of the apartheid South Africa. Judie Newman observes that gender is a conditioning factor in Gordimer's fiction. But she never identified with the feminist thought though she was very sensitive to women's oppression. This is because, Gordimer argues, in South Africa racism is primary and sexism is secondary. However, this does not mean that she has been indifferent to the oppression of women. Throughout her fiction she has shown her concern for women's suffering and their subordinate position. In fact, she has analysed the socio-political issues in her fiction through her own brand of micropolitics or politics of the body. It is in the light of her idea of politics of the body that this chapter focuses on the fiction of Gordimer.

The fifth chapter concludes the study highlighting the theme of acquiescence and resistance. Gordimer's characters live in a world governed by apartheid laws. The anti-apartheid movement turned from passive to active. The fiction of Gordimer, particularly

her novels reflects this socio-political condition of South Africa. Even the white liberal characters in her early novels question racism. They are often seen to accept blacks as their men and women. Her later fiction like *A Sport of Nature* and *My Son's Story* show characters who turned radical or took part in the subversive activities. Gordimer 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.

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 the culture of resistance in the fiction of Gordimer.

Note:

1. The Population Registration Act, 1950 classified the South Africans into White, Black, Indian and Coloured. In apartheid South Africa the population was often divided between 'whites' and 'non-whites'. However, the terms white, black, coloured and Indian have been in common use since then and therefore they are not italicised in the thesis.

Works Cited

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