

The Voice of oppressed in the select novels of Nadine Gordimer

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the nature of protest as well as their issues and problems while addressing the discourse on apartheid South Africa. This paper relates to examine the relationship between these two major research queries, which underpins as under two contexts as: (i) Remonstrations (ii) Racial discrimination. The racial discrimination needs for understanding the problems and struggle in South Africa. It also ignites to the fight for human rights of the people, who suffer from inequality and struggling for their identity crisis. South African novels represent the problems and concerns of people who belong to the marginal group. However, this paper focuses on South African literature, which demands to the end of racial discrimination, unequal educational system and segregation as divided land policy represents through the discourses. This paper studies the subject of racial discrimination and self identity of characters in three novels : Nadine Gordimer's *A Guest of honour*, *July's People*, and *My son's story*.

Key words:

South Africa, Race, discrimination, Gender, segregation, identity, Marginal group, inequality.

Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution; One makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of perception is persecution . The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power.

-George Orwell, (1984)

George Orwell words come true through the novelist Nadine Gordimer's writing. She was one of the prominent writers of world literature. She was a South African writer, political activist and recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. In 1974, she was the joint winner of Booker Prize with Stanley Middleton. Her writings dealt with political censorship and racism in South Africa. As a young girl she has seen the racial discrimination and violence faced by the black people and white people. She also saw black people struggling for the basic rights of all human beings irrespective of race. She began her writing career at the age of nine.

Gordimer has achieved global appreciation for her works, most of which deal with political issues as well as the moral and psychological tensions of South African society. Almost all of Gordimer's works deal with issues of resistance, obedience of the blacks and politics, mainly concerning race in South Africa. Furthermore, Gordimer has been a keen activist against racism in South Africa and has long held an iconic status there; she is a victor of tolerance, free speech and understanding and her conviction and self-belief in refusing to become an exile, regardless of the banning of most of her works by the South African regime. Thus, Literature for Gordimer is the main vehicle through which she conveys her protest and rebellion against apartheid, as her involvement with South African politics is apparent in her works.

Gordimer's A Guest of Honour centres around a white male protagonist - James Bray. An ex-colonial Englishman, a British Civil servant, once removed from the country for his alleged support to the independence revolution, he is now invited by the same black freedom fighters who are now the rulers of their independent state to participate in the country's independence celebrations. He is a state guest of honour; a

personal invitee of the President Adamson Mweta. On a special personal from Mweta he settles back in this same country where he had once been a colonial D.C. - a British District Commissioner. He is now assigned the job of a special advisor on Education in this independent black state.

James Bray eventually gets involved in the internal power politics of the country which is between two stalwarts of the freedom struggle -the present President Adamson Mweta, and Edward Shinza, with both of whom Bray shares an equally intimate relationship, with whom he once a part of a triumvirate. Shinza and Mweta, themselves close comrades in arms once, have now drifted apart to become bitter political opponents. Bray is ultimately claimed by this politics, and becomes a victim of the resultant violence of this internal power politics. Bray is the innocent victim - killed because of his skin colour by those whom he had always supported and patronized - the Africans. And this is the ultimate fate of James Bray the state's 'Guest of Honour'. It is the underlying irony of these words that give the novel its title, and enhance the significance of this title. Stephen Clingman comments that "*A Guest of Honour is probably unparalleled in its specific fusion of complex political theory and discourse with more conventional narrative form*". (Stephen, 127)

Apartheid, as a manifestation of the white race's lust for power is a theme that recurs very often in Nadine Gordimer's fiction. An end of apartheid does not imply an end of the politics of power. Power politics will continue to corrode the political-economic structure of a country, even after apartheid. Under apartheid power politics was controlled by the white race, but in a post apartheid state, the contest for power can take shape of internal power struggle in a nouveau independent republic. It is this potential threat that Gordimer exposes through an imaginary situation where this internal power politics explodes into a civil war Unable to suppress internal clashes of power the troubled President Mweta understands the truth.

Entangled in this internal power struggle the newly empowered President again elicits the support a white regime, to suppress this civil war notwithstanding the threat to his Nation's independence. Is this the desired independence? Is this the freedom that politicians speak about? Is apartheid the only form of power struggle constricting African states? Is racism limited only to apartheid and white rule? These are some ironical questions that *A Guest of Honour*, draws attention towards.

Predominantly in *My Son's Story* and *July's People*, Gordimer presented the extant situations and problems like apartheid; both race and class; and violence. The humans experience becomes reality. It may be either positive or negative. Overall realism portrays the problems resisted by people and life in a certain period. Realism invites people to move towards attaining something positive in life.

Gordimer has treated her novels with general themes, such as apartheid both division of class and race, Sufferings of women in the society and social and political life of Africa. Particularly in these two novels *My Son's Story* and *July's People* she reflected the society in her way. She has committed herself for the people, for the need of freedom in their society. These novels mainly concerned with two important things in the society.

Gordimer, as she herself registers, "is not a politically minded person." Howbeit she was able to assimilate the notion of politics through the lives of individual behavior. She conceded man as political animal and the political conditions of her land had always affected her. The political reality of her results manifestly from her preoccupations with social reality. She relinquished the connections between the private lives and public lives. In South Africa context, political reality cannot be separated. Gordimer herself stated about her view on politics and as a writer as "*I am a writer. But, because the society in which I live is so permeated with politics, my work has become intimately connected with the translation of political events, of the way politics affect the lives of the people*". (114).

Gordimer directs that the entire society should be with freedom. According to Gordimer, She needs a change in the apartheid society, so she scrutinizes the society with techniques in her writing. In *July's People*, Gordimer showcased the middle-class whites who are living the society of blacks and it brings a connection between whites and blacks as well as the individual and the society. Gordimer applied the reality in a graphical manner and a critic remarked in the Observer on *July's People* (quoted on the back flap of the text),

“Nadine Gordimer is the real: thing: by which I mean a true writer of graphic power, palpating sensibility, and high and persistent emotional voltage”.

The epigraph of the novel shows the reality and it was well absorbed by Gordimer and she has reflected it with the lines of Antonio Gramsci words that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. The current situation of her land she expressed in this novel. *July's People* releases with the Smales family in a shack provide to them by their servant July. July offers more for them and that supported their concession. The novel revolved around the family relationship in the in the unstable situation between Bam and Maureen who think “they yearned to there to be no time left all, while there still was. They dismayed at appalling thought that they might find they had lived out their whole lives as they were, born white pariah dogs in a black continent. In *July's People*, Maureen, the protagonist, depicts the negative image of the white liberals who appear assertive, not even willing to face reality.

Bam and Maureen owned many things and July could afford them a hire live. While coming to Maureen respond is much slower to their environment than their children are. However, their Children Gina, Royce, and Victor are adapted easily to the environment. In other words, there is not Maureen who is qualified for taking leading role in the new South Africa but her children, who have absorbed the African ideologies, traditions, values, language and emerge both consciously and unconsciously delving in the African society to be accepted by them that could do the job. These children succeeded in passing into the African black society because they have already constructed an identity that values sharing and redistributing wealth, skills, and emotions.

This shows the conflict that the whites cannot adapt easily to the environment and that is the reality which portrayed by Gordimer. From the beginning to the end the novel brings the relation between conflict between whites and blacks. Especially the two characters in this novel July and Maureen there is a battle and this battle divulges the racist clash between dishonest black servant and alien employer. Gordimer reflects the realism in an effective way and this chapter scrutinizes her approach to realism and brings out her view on the growth of the individual in the way of self conscious to change.

My Son's Story novel brings the characters in a different view that each character has their own role in the society. The characters move in the way of personal assuming social responsibility to bring a powerful society with equality, morality and justice. The apartheid diminishes the self respect of black people in the society even they are in good in their wealth. And this system of apartheid made them to think on freedom and it takes the blacks to establish the societal values such as justice, equality and brotherhood in the society. Gordimer places this apartheid in the novel *My Son's Story* and with help of the characters such as Sonny, Aila and Baby but Will, the protagonist of the novel plays a vital role in the novel as a writer. *My Son's Story* is one of the most influential novels by Gordimer, in which she explored the political situation in South Africa.

Gordimer used a new kind of style in this novel. She focused mainly on the relationship between whites and blacks, with the personal life and political struggle. She brought the characters with importance, which reflects the society and their culture. The complete portrayal of South African society can be identified in this novel. She was the perfect observer of the history, which is evident in this novel. Society which was in the apartheid and the people who lived in this system had no power to break this people adapted with fear of punishment by the ruling authority. They became powerless to get their essential needs in the apartheid society.

My Son's Story reflects the issue of apartheid system perfectly and sketches that the individual to question the apartheid in the Society and with the character Sonny, who helps the people in the society. The plot of the novel with an individual who involved well in the society for the people and it brings the involvement of whole family in the freedom struggle. Especially the characters in the novel struggle from the societal structures, traditions, apartheid system and which destroyed the entire family. While the novel opens the portrayal, two-divided society can be easily observed:

Cinemas had been open to us only a year or so; it was a double freedom I took: to bunk study and to sit in the maroon nylon velvet seat of a cinema in a suburb where the whites live. My father was not well off but my parents wanted my sister and me have a youth less stunted by the limits of an empty pocket they had, and my pocket money was more generous than their precarious position, at the time, warranted. (My Son's Story, 1)

The conflicts can be easily traced in the novel, *My Son's Story* which reveals the society in the form of apartheid. There is no consideration for the blacks in this society. Whites utilized this opportunity in a bad way, they used blacks in a severe way, and they gave hard works to them. Which is well reflected in the novel as "Where is great-grandfather or grandfather had come from nobody had recorded- the rough hands of those generations did not write letter". These above lines may show the past life of the people especially from the black community and it was well expressed and at the same time you can find the reality of the people in the apartheid as "*there was no car; his Sonny-boy bounced instead on the exposed springs of chairs and sofas, and had lint in his curls. The boy was the first in the family to leave earth, cement wood and kapok behind and take up the pen and book.*" (5) In this system of apartheid, the Blacks did not have any power and they could not access anything for themselves. Even they did not have the rights to enter into a library in the apartheid environment.

Gordimer hurts this system and she took it as a social sin which is followed by whites during the apartheid system and she brought out the hateful experience of the blacks which she also experienced by facing the system in her life in her own land. And it was expressed in the novel how the people were treated in the system of apartheid. It was because of *them* whose pigment darkened the blood, procreated a murky dilution in the veins of the of the white town. The people of black community suffered a lot and they were disqualified for the birthright of the cinema, the library, the lavatories and the coat of arms. Sonny was suffered by this system. He was the father of the protagonist, Will.

Sonny was a "*schoolteacher in one of the towns that had grown up long ago along the reef of gold-bearing rock east of the city-Johannesburg.*" As from the separated community in the society he done many service for the people and the society and as an individual he fought for the rights in non-violence manner. The society did not accept his way, because the domination of whites and he took care of black people in safe way. Even he was in prison he done his service to the people of his community not only for his community and for the society. Sonny as an individual who fought for his people and took care of them as "always of the blacks in another way; well' this was nascent in that vague yet insistent sense of responsibility he had." The people of black community did not have powers like the whites in the society. Sonny's father was well identified by their community. They did not have powers like their authority and did not have powers as their authorities who were in the managerial jobs, attorneys and other high officials.

Sonny knew them better, "*there were local lawmakers, proconsuls, gauleiters in the town's council chamber under the photographs of the past mayors and the motto CARPE DIEM.*" Sonny reveals that "*he did things for other people the way did things for us_ his family. That was it; to give came to him naturally, as it came to them to take. The blacks did not go for things such as dynamism and other higher ranks and their only need is self-respect. Even Sonny was a teacher but: People saw him as one of themselves- powerless- who nevertheless had the special kind of self-respect (yes, that gain) that makes it possible influence others-take on responsibility for their lives in way different from that of those, the masters, in the administrative offices, courtrooms and police stations.*" (My Son's Story, 18)

The suppressed people expect something from the suppressed community. So, Gordimer revives the missing feature of self-respect of the black community was thing in them. Inquiring the whites may be reaching a change in the society and life. Gordimer observes the whites consciousness as one of the greatest problem, which separates the blacks from whites. Gordimer observes white people and their behavior in the society. Social realism insists a revolutionary change in their hearts and minds of the black people. Particularly in these three novels by A Guest of Honour, *My Son's Story* and *July's People* she explained the society in her way. She has committed herself for the people and need of freedom in their society. These novels mainly

concerned with reality of the society with artistic and political situation. In an interview she gives “*Social realist is my general outlook, though I am aware of the greatest failures of socialist experiments. I think that to be alive is an expression of belief in something.... I don't believe in perfection, I believe in limited goals,*” Social realism reveals Gordimer's works especially novels affect the society to reach more insight of reality on the social conditions of the blacks. Through reaching this insight of reality, the division of class and race made them to think on themselves. Racial discrimination reflects the problems of the society. The division of class and race is a perfect example of the problems in the society all over the world. Self-identity may achieve responsibility in everyone for a new world with humanity.

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