

A World of Strangers: Revisiting the Apartheid

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the reflection of apartheid and its resistance in Nadine Gordimer's novel, *A World of Strangers*. It focuses on the racial segregation and its impact on the South African life in the apartheid regime. The critical method in this study is influenced by the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha. Unlike Frantz Fanon, Bhabha does not see the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized simply in terms of the self and the Other. He argues that their relationship or identity is not fixed or stable. He asserts that all cultures are impure and hybrid. In his book, *The Location of Culture*, he examines issues like 'border lives', cultural difference and colonial oppression which can be used to analyze Gordimer's fiction and resistance against apartheid. Apartheid can be said to be a continuity of the colonial set up of dividing the people in different groups and zones. This has led to physical and psychological borders in South African society. Gordimer depicts this condition of life through her characters' marginality and psychological alienation that they suffer in the apartheid regime. The paper will also discuss how Gordimer tries to offer resistance against the apartheid.

Keywords: Bhabha, apartheid, border, resistance, Gordimer.

Introduction:

Nadine Gordimer (1923 –2014) has been one of the significant voices in the cultural history of South Africa. Her social commitment and artistic zeal made her focused into the heart of anti- apartheid movement to create a body of fiction that brought her a Nobel Prize in 1991. Her international literary eminence is complemented by her role within South Africa as an activist in the culture of resistance against apartheid. The Afrikaner dominated Nationalist Government in 1948 adopted a policy of racial segregation known as 'apartheid' which means 'apartness' in Afrikaans. Every community or group of people considered non-European by the government was governed separately and subordinated at every level to white South Africans. It may be mentioned that policies of racial segregation already existed as laws. For example, the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act proclaimed that the cities were 'whites only' residential areas. But under apartheid many more similar policies were enacted and implemented. 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 into separate blocks of black and white neighbourhoods. The Pass Laws (1952) forced the South Africans to carry a pass-book that allowed them to work or remain in white areas. The apartheid policy became more oppressive in the 1960's and 70's. The Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and Soweto Revolt in 1976 shocked the world. There had been protests against the unjust and brutal policies of apartheid till the election of Nelson Mandela as the president of South Africa in the first ever general election held on the basis of adult suffrage. Gordimer was intensely alert to these developments. In fact, there is a parallel between her literary career and the rise and fall of apartheid regime. Her fiction offers a uniquely imaginative record of the apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Clingman considers history as the conditioning force of her

fiction (15). And the history of South Africa in the second half of twentieth century is the history of apartheid and its resistance.

Indeed, Gordimer has been a consistent critic of the apartheid though she is herself a white. In her career the public world merges into the private and, as observed by Dominic Head, “this returns us to the most remarkable fact about her oeuvre: its massive historical and political significance as a developing and shifting response to events in modern South Africa, spanning over forty years and reaching into six decades, from the 1940s to 1990s” (2). She has been writing in the tradition of what the Marxist critic Georg Lukacs called the critical realism in which ‘the human condition is understood dynamically in an historical perspective’ (Head 12). She has been aware of living conditions in a constantly changing social and political context and emerged as a prominent interpreter of South African life. She has closely observed the world in which she lives. Her observation ranges from matters of minor detail to major historical events such as capturing of power by Afrikaner National Party in 1948 and the Soweto Revolt of 1976. In his valuable study *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* Stephen Clingman suggests “. . .if we are searching for an inner pathway to guide us through South African history over past forty or so years, there are few better places to look for it than in the novels of Nadine Gordimer”(224). Indeed, Gordimer’s novels provide a deep historical insight into the history of her time and she has been aware of the historical significance of her work. In the ‘Introduction’ to *Selected Stories* (1978), Gordimer acknowledges that in her writing she acts upon her society, while, in this relationship of mutual influence, history is acting upon her. “The change in social attitudes unconsciously reflected in the stories represents both that of the people in my society –that is to say, history –and my apprehension of it; in the writing I am acting upon my society, and in the manner my apprehension, all the time history is acting upon me” (13).

Methodology:

This paper attempts to study the reflection of apartheid and its resistance in Nadine Gordimer’s novel, *A World of Strangers*. It focuses on the racial segregation and its impact on the South African life in the apartheid regime. The critical method in this study is influenced by the postcolonial critic Homi Bhaba. Unlike Frantz Fanon, Bhaba does not see the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised simply in terms of the self and the other. He argues that relationship is ambivalent and unstable. The coloniser wishes the natives imitate or ‘mimic’ his habits and values. At the same time he wants to keep the difference between himself and the natives. On the other hand, when the native mimic the colonial master, he does so with subtle variations and nuances. Thus the colonial discourse “produces ambivalent subjects whose **mimicry** is never very far from mockery” (Bill Ashcroft, et. al., *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 10). So the mimicry of the native displays obedience as well as disobedience. Bhabha calls this dualism resistance. He asserts that all cultures are impure and hybrid. In his book, *The Location of Culture*, he examines issues like ‘border lives’, cultural difference and colonial oppression which can be used to analyze Gordimer’s fiction and resistance against apartheid. Bhabha argues that living at the border or margin demands a new ‘art of the present’ (McLeod, 217). Borders are thresholds which separate as well

as connect different places. 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). Bhabha claims that the borders between cultures are porous. Cultures moves across the supposed barriers through the porous border. Hence cultures are hybrid and fluid. The border disturbs the conventional patterns. On the other hand, it is also the place of possible new ideas.

Apartheid can be said to be a continuity of the colonial set up to oppress the black Africans by dividing the people in different groups and zones. This has led to physical and psychological borders in South African society. Gordimer depicts this condition of life through her characters’ marginality and psychological alienation that they suffer in the apartheid regime. As in Bhabha, the ‘beyond’ signifies a spatial distance between the white and the black in Gordimer’s fiction. In her fiction she constructs the imagined communities blacks, coloured and Afrikaners to represent the cultural hybridity of the time.

Review of literature:

Gordimer has gained a lot of critical attention over the years. Several book-length studies and a plethora of articles have been written about her work. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986) by Stephen Clingman is one of the most informative and valuable studies on Gordimer. Clingman traces Gordimer’s developing consciousness of history through her novels. He reads her novels largely in terms of the conditioning force of South Africa. Contextualized in the social and intellectual developments of the time, the book offers a close analysis of the novels. 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. John Cooke’s *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/ Public Landscapes* (1985) makes a detail discussion of Gordimer’s treatment of space. He approaches Gordimer’s fiction from the perspectives of landscapes on which her novels revolve and which show a change of perception. In his study 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. Judie Newman’s *Nadine Gordimer* (1988) examines how the issue of gender complicates the themes of race and colonialism in the novels of Gordimer. “In her novels, the interaction of private and public, the complex investigation of the connection between psychological and political, draws upon an awareness of the relation of genre to gender” (Newman, 17).

Nadine Gordimer's Novel *A World of Strangers*:

Nadine Gordimer published her first novel *The Lying Days* in 1953. The publication of this novel in the *Drum* heralded a new era in South African writings in English. The novel is often considered as a model of *buildungsroman*. The novel serves as a picture of exposition of apartheid; its effects on society through the perceptions of Helen Shaw whose thinking or actions are neither tainted, nor pre-conditioned by any belief. Helen faces the classic colonial dilemma pondered over by writers as diverse as Olive Schreiner, V. S. Naipaul and Patrick White. In South African history, Sophiatown is both a place and a time. During the 1950's it was the hub of a cultural renaissance. *A World of Strangers* (1958) is Gordimer's Sophiatown novel. As seen in the novel, Sophiatown became a centre for conscientious multiracialism, often in an atmosphere of strained *bonhomie*. The novel is set against the background of the movements opposed to apartheid in the 1950s. The philosophy of these movements spearheaded by the Congress Alliance was multi-racialism. In fact, multi-racialism was a social way of life. The magazine, *Drum* provided a platform to the reporters, writers, critics and photographers who changed the way black people were represented in society. Sophiatown, a suburb of Johannesburg, became a hub of multiracial culture. As Clingman observes, "In this respect Sophiatown was itself a vital symbol of the 1950s: an ethnically mixed and vibrant 'black' township on the borders of Johannesburg, virtually part of Johannesburg itself. In a number of ways this social world was related to the broader political moment of which it was a part"(49). Gordimer is involved with different aspects of Johannesburg life of this time. She developed friendship with the members of the *Drum* such as Henry Nxumalo ('Mr Drum'), Can Themba, Bloke Modisane and others. At this time she began her lasting friendship with Bettie du Toit, a banned Afrikaner trade unionist.

However, in *A World of Strangers* Gordimer explores the life in South Africa from the point of view of an outsider, Toby Hood, an Oxford graduate. "Where *The Lying Days* almost ignores the black world to concentrate upon the development of consciousness of a white, *A World of Strangers* takes its narrator into the townships, particularly Sophia town"(Newman 22). Toby Hood comes from England to South Africa to look into the affairs of the publishing agency of his family. But he does not have any inclination to the family's interest in anti-colonial causes. He tries to remain neutral to South African politics and leads a life oscillating between the white high society and the black townships. He tries to understand the nature of these unbridgeable 'world of strangers' through his personal relationships: "his kindred black bachelor friend, the similarly apolitical Steven Sitole, takes him to the townships; by contrast, his prejudiced lover Cecil Rowe (from whom Toby conceals his friendship with Steven) epitomizes the attraction he finds in privileged white society" (Head 48). He gains his first significant experience of South African white society by a visit to the High House, a mansion of the wealthy mining magnate Hamish Alexander. It is at this place he meets the three important people of his life: Cecil Rowe, a divorcee, who becomes his mistress. Another important person is Anna Louw, the Afrikaner lawyer and activist, who married a South African Indian and then divorced. Anna introduces him to different people who were engaged in the struggle of the black for liberation. Most significantly, Anna takes him to a party of mixed races, where

people get together and makes friends across racial divide. In such meetings, Toby meets Steven Sitole who has returned from England, and Sam, a struggling musician. Steven makes a profound effect upon Toby's life. From his visit to the parties and other places, Toby realizes that colour and social barriers keep the white and the black far away from knowing each other. He discovers that there exists a void between the worlds of the blacks and the whites: "I passed from one world to another –but neither was real to me. For in each, what sign was there that the other existed" (*A World of Strangers*, 197)? Gordimer effectively depicts the contrasting worlds of the white and the black. Against the hard, poverty stricken world of the blacks is presented the lavish world of the whites. In the parties at the High House, Toby meets the rich white businessmen and industrialists. On the other hand, there is a careless attitude to life in the black township. Food, survival and reproduction are the primary concern of life in this township. In fact, Gordimer has pitted the blacks against the whites throughout the novel to make differences prominent. Toby finds that there is a deep divide between the rich white life and the poor blacks.

While I had kept going, simply carried along, I had not consciously been aware of the enormous strain of such a way of life, where one set of loyalties and interests made claims in direct conflict with another set, equally strong; where not only did I have to keep my friends physically apart, but could not even speak to one group about the others (*A World of Strangers*, 258).

Though he plans to remain neutral, he moves between the white society and the poor world of the blacks. He is upset that the white society makes no room for relationships with blacks like Sam and Steven. He wonders what he will write in his letters to his family and friends back in England:

Could I tell them how pleasant it was to be lulled and indulged at the High House? Could I explain the freedom I felt where I had no legal right to be in that place of segregation, a location? I suppose that to have a 'life out there', a real life in Johannesburg, you'd have to belong in one or the other, for keeps (*A World of Strangers*, 203).

Toby finds that the divide between the whites and the blacks is deep and that it is irreconcilable. There develops in him a sense of despondency and alienation. "I had not been to Alexander's for weeks. I couldn't go there any more, that was all" (*A World of Strangers*, 257). His failure, though temporary, to continue his contact with the privileged whites and his friendship with Steven and Anna makes him understand the success of separateness of apartheid in South Africa: "You couldn't really reconcile one with the other, the way people were, the way laws were and make a whole" (*A World of Strangers*, 203).

But Gordimer does not represent the character of Toby as one who is disappointed at the prevailing racial prejudices in South Africa. His complicity with the apartheid does not escape the critical lens of Gordimer. Like Steven, he is indifferent to the politics of South African life. But his lack of commitment to the fight against apartheid does not give him the freedom of a 'private life'. His mistress Cecil Rowe has a different attitude to life and to the blacks. She wishes she had enough money and lived in Europe. So she ultimately marries Guy Patterson in her greed and fear of life. She has a strong racial prejudice. So much

so that she shudders at the thought of touching a black skin: “Her hand came out in the imaginary experiment and hesitated, wavered back” (*A World of Strangers*, 263). She cannot take it easily that Toby socializes with the blacks or treats a black person as an equal. Though Toby befriends Steven, he makes it sure that the latter never meets Cecil. He conceals his friendship with Steven from Cecil because he fears that if he does so he will lose her. Thus, though he intends to remain indifferent to the politics of the land, he himself contributes to the segregation of the races.

But Steven’s death in a car accident provides him “a check, a pause” to think about the kind of life he has been living. He quickly realizes that even when black and white people live together in South Africa, they are strangers in each other’s world. He says, “What I had known of Steven, a stranger, living and dying a life I could at best only observe; my brother” (*A World of Strangers*, 252). His 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. So, Clingman observes:

“Most tellingly, in a moment of sudden dread Toby understands that it is precisely his attitude of self-centered indifference that has helped constitute the social divide of the ‘world of strangers’ in the first place, and that to this extent he has himself been complicit in the general cause of Steven’s death. The only moral rehabilitation appropriate to Toby lies in a new social commitment. Specifically, it is a commitment measured in another friendship that he now takes up, this time with Sam Mofokenzazi”(55).

This friendship between Toby and the black Sam is very significant. It marks a change in Toby, at least in his attitude and intention. 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. However, Sam is not sure of Toby’s decision: “May be you won’t come back at all” (*A World of Strangers*, 266). Gordimer seems to suggest that their friendship transcends all ideologies and signals the beginning of a cultural synthesis against the apartheid. Through the epigraph of the novel, she seems to anticipate the emergence of a revolutionary spirit against the apartheid:

I want the strong air of the most profound night
to remove flowers and letters from the arch where you sleep,
and a black boy to announce to the gold minded whites
the arrival of the reign of the ear of corn (Federico Garcia Lorca).

Conclusion:

The action of the novel, *A World of Strangers* revolves around Toby’s oscillation –both physical and mental –between Johannesburg and the black townships. The mixed gatherings are spaces or borders that have the possibility of bridging the racial divide. These parties of mixed people may be described as what Bhabha called ‘borderlands’. They are the meeting points, thresholds of two worlds. Clingman describes

the novel a “frontier” text, suggesting a transition from one world to another (71). Toby moves to the borderlands or frontier places to find a world of friendships across racial divide. In addition to the cross racial friendship, Gordimer represents the character of Steven in a way that challenges the apartheid regime South Africa. Steven maintains “the network of contacts” within which he operates. Toby notices that Steven “seems to know ‘a fellow somewhere’” (Head, 59). This ‘network’ 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” (*A World of Strangers*, 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 (Head, 59). Thus, Gordimer shows a possibility of change in the South African society divided into groups and zones under the apartheid regime. The 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.

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