

# ‘A Discourse on contemporary Cultural, Political, Economical aspects in the novels of Nadine Gordimer’s ‘My Son’s Story’ and Lalithambika Antharjanam’s ‘Agnisakshi’: A Comparative Study’.

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Nadine Gordimer is South African woman novelist and as a remarkable Nobel Prize winner for literature in the field of South African Literature. Because of this lead to a literature of protesting inequality and discrimination under apartheid rather than a literature about African values: “*Even at its most militant, black South African writing is basically liberal in lamenting the loss of an integrated multiracial society. In South Africa the socio-political life presents the kind of challenge that produces writers*”<sup>1</sup>. As a native-born South African, Gordimer elected to stay in a country ruled by a single political party, whose policies shattered all her beliefs and feelings, and she experienced the consequences of that choice. Her ‘*Anti-Apartheid*’ tradition’s Socio-cultural, political and economical aspects are remarkable in the novel ‘*My Son’s Story*’. The specter of Anti-apartheid casts an unavoidable shadow over writers from white privileged society despite the breakdown of the political system of apartheid.

The novel ‘*My Son’s Story*’ makes a shift in her focus from concern with the role of whites in a sharply polarized society to the experience of those on the other side of *the colour bar and apartheid and anti apartheid traditions*. Apartheid pervaded South African culture as well as its laws. The “*whites only*” policy prohibited blacks from holding many jobs; they were not allowed to run businesses or professional practices in any areas designed for whites only. Police vans roamed the “*white area*” to round up illegal blacks, i.e. those not carrying a pass. Schools, hospitals, beaches, trains, buses were segregated. Park benches were all labeled ‘*Europeans only*’. There were no public swimming pools, libraries, parks, cinemas or any amenities except police stations in black areas. Cinemas in white areas, restaurants and hotels were not allowed to admit blacks except as workers. A white entering a shop would be served first ahead of blacks, already in the queue, irrespective of age, dress, or any other factors. Until the 1980s, blacks were always expected to step off the pavement to make way for any white pedestrian. A grown black man would be referred to as ‘*boy*’ to his face, by whites. When *Nelson Mandela* became the president of South Africa then the apartheid and white people’s status was decreased and Blacks got their own freedom of life in South Africa. And then *Nelson Mandela* became ‘*Africa’s Gandhi*’ and ‘*Anti-Apartheid Champion*’ in the view of Blacks and even World. In addition to racial categories, apartheid recognized ten black African “*tribes*” or ‘*Bantu nations*’, each of which was assigned a “*Bantu*” homeland. Although the National Party claimed that these homelands allowed blacks to maintain their ‘*tribal customs and political structures*’, the primary objective of the homelands was to prevent formation of

class-based resistance movements among black workers. The event provoked international condemnation and economic boycotts against South Africa. In *'My Son's Story'* Sonny and Aila have played *cultural, political, and economical* role in the novel. Both the characters have the revolutionary nature in their activities of the novel. This struggling nature is narrated by Will in the novel. Aila's role as revolutionary in political aspects is excellent in the novel. So, *apartheid* sought to control and divide South African society through an elaborate set of race-based laws, restricting not only where people could live or work but also with whom they could marry or even associate.

The novel begins with a teenage boy playing truant who catches his father doing much the same. The two run in to one another at a movie theatre. The son's minnow of a lie is swallowed up by the enormous shark of his father's obvious infidelity. But without batting an eyelash, his father introduces him to his white mistress. *'My Son's Story'* is a novel set apartheid South Africa at a point time when black Africans and coloreds just begin to resist the cruel and unjust system. The writer constantly addresses the central theme resistance and mentions the many forms in which resistance to *'apartheid'* took place. The efforts of the authorities to contain the resistance are also well detailed in the novel.

It was no longer strictly illegal for a black man and a white woman to be together, but Gordimer shows it was not accepted either. But this is less the point, really, because Sonny's affair coincides with his political awakening. His love for Hannah runs parallel to his developing passion for revolution, for justice, and the two experiences are simply inseparable and Will remain inseparable. The reality and existentiality cause as the big problem for Sonny life in the novel *'My Son's Story'*. The novel is set in the decade prior to the beginning of the end of apartheid as a state policy. A very big part of the evil policy is the harm it does to the souls of those raised under it as Gordimer shows us brilliantly in the novel. *"People from the churches, representatives from foreign embassies"* demonstrated their solidarity with the resistance too when the trial of political detainees came up. Many non-whites devoted their lives to and derived meaning for their lives in *"the political struggle"* (P.47). Members of the resistance movement learnt many tactics of the struggle, including how to *"use a private oblique language to receive information from intimates.... A prison code when they were in custody"* (P48). Having made such sacrifices and commitment to struggle, the like of Aila went ahead and *"would not let the state destroy the discipline of their daily life"* (P.51). There was also *"support for the Defense among influential people abroad"* (P.52). The apartheid regime had suspects involved in the resistance spend *"many months in detention"*, then *"sent back to prison as convicts after the trail"* (P.54). In the trails, most of the charges were trumped up, with evidence planted to incriminate the accused and win their conviction. Not even the threat of prison and separation from loved ones, or offers of amnesty in return for discounting their mission could change their resolve towards resistance. After prison, former inmates attended house meeting known as *"debriefing; those who had been inside related their experiences in resisting interrogation, intimidation, solitude, for the benefit of those who might sometime find themselves inside, and for individuals or organizations who sought the best means of supporting those on trial, of which there were many"* (P.63).

But Sonny has political involvement to engage his whole being—*"his judgement never lost touch with principle, while his unhesitating return to the struggle after detained and imprisonment ensures that he was*

capable of bold pragmatism. With these credentials added to his intelligence and gifts as a speaker, he had emerged from among others to the company of decision-makers. There the combination of his personality was reflected in his position: considered as a one of the radicals, he was yet assuring to the cautious; he could be used to press decisions in a form acceptable to them” (P.96). With Hannah, he argues and unravels his ideas, comrades united in a line of thought which sometimes unaccountably diverged. Hannah goes away because her grandfather has passed away, and now that Sonny is alone, he is restless, waiting impatiently for the phone calls. During the course of one such call, Hannah tells him that she has been declared a prohibited immigrant. He tries to help her but all turn out to be futile. But Hannah tells Sonny, “*You are the only friend I’ve ever had*”, (P. 121). But when Aila returns, she is full of the news of Baby’s marriage and her pregnancy. But he is totally unaware of the reality and existentiality of Aila’s situation. He misinterprets it as merely a woman’s joy at the idea of birth. And now that Aila has cut her long hair, he feels she is like any other woman now, and experiences a sense of exaltation: “*He’s rid of Aila Free*” (119). Aila as an individual character in the novel takes an important political role to prove the concept of modern realism and existentialism in her nature in the society. Because of the character of Aila finally joins with revolutionary activities in the novel. That is revealed later part of the novel ‘*My Son’s Story*’.

Lalithambika Antharjanam is one of the major female novelists in Malayalam Literature. She was born in Kerala and the only daughter among nine children. Antharjanam’s ‘*Caste*’ and ‘*Gender*’ based *Socio-cultural, political, economical* aspects in the novel ‘*Fire as Witness*’ reflects her sensitivity. She generally deals with the problems of lower and suffering class traditions. ‘Antharjanam urges her readers not to look at the novel as the history of the ascetic she once met by chance on the banks of the Ganga. That incident, she says, was only the seed of ‘*Agnisakshi*’, *keeping in mind certain stores I knew or had experienced, I wanted to make this novel a memoir of the social and political changes of the last forty years*’<sup>2</sup>. It tells the story of a Namboodiri woman, who is drawn into the struggle for social, political and economical emancipation but cannot easily shake of the chains of tradition that bind her. Her novel has provided insights into the many levels of alienation women of her powerful orthodox community experienced, much of it resulting from pointless rituals and the burden of tradition and caste which served only the family patriarch and harmed practically everybody else. In the wake of social modernity, the Brahmin community lost much of its power and the Kerala society as whole became radicalized in conjunction with the nationalist struggle. It helped to bring more women into the public culture, particularly into the cultural, political and economic ways.

‘*Fire as Witness*’ depicts Namboodiri’s ‘*Caste*’ and ‘*Gender*’ based ‘*desi*’ caste system of Kerala in the aspects. At the heart of Antharjanam’s great, controversial work ‘*Fire as Witness*’ lays the ritual displacement of woman. The story is told from the view of a half caste Namboodiri girl, who had access to the inner sanctums of Namboodiri household due to her parentage (her father was a Brahmin) but was still considered untouchable because her mother was from a lower caste. It is a story about the age old struggle of old and new, the traditional and the modern. Tethi, the heroine of the novel, is the first scene by the narrator, as she is led into the Namboodiri household as a new bride, her presence essential to the maintenance of household and divine order: ‘*Tethikuttykavu, young mistress of the house, the elder sister, the bride of Manapalli Mana (the*

residence of Namboodiri Brahmins of Kerala) docked in a white cloth with golden border, wearing Chittu (Cherutali, ornaments in gold worn by Namboodiri women) and brass bangles—a slim, pale, figure with the soothing beauty of a tender mango leaf’ (P.20). Then follows a detailed description of culture how the shy young bride of fourteen years is led into the Illam (Another name for the residence of Namboodiris), to the music of flute and drum and the chanting of Vedas. The priest instructs the couple to enter the inner courtyard and then the inmost sanctum: “pray to your family goddess well and place your right foot first and step inside”. “Arappuvee...Puy...Puy...Kulu...Kulu...Kulu... Kulu”. ‘The sounds of jubilation were then raised by the crowd. On either side ladies, holding metal plates with lighted lamps and other auspicious articles, welcomed them. Red chrysanthemums and fried grain were showered on them. An auspicious deity was being installed at Manapalli Illam’ (P.20). But this vision of culture and ceremony cuts to a young girl’s gaze, her natural innocence violated.

The adult narrator swivels, back to childhood, recalling the roughness with which as a young girl she was thrust away from the door by the older Namboodiri women, fearful lest as the daughter of a Nair mother, her father is none other than the famous *Aphan* (The name by which the younger brother of the Namboodiri family was called) Namboodiri, master of the Mam, father of the bridegroom, her presence pollute the auspicious ritual. By making Thankam, grown older, grandmother now, the narrator of the novel, Antharjanam sets up a natural frame for her feminist vision, the women so close to the realm of ritual and order, intimate with the workings of ceremonious passages, yet debarred from it, watching, witnessing as best she can, the installation of the iconic feminine, the *new bride*. When she reached the inner corridor, a harsh voice: “Aye, Aye, move over child, you have touched everything and polluted them. You will blind us all. Just because you are the daughter of *Aphan Namboodiri*, will you not to be considered as belonging to the *Sudra caste*”? (P.21). The burning shame, the humiliation, the terrible sense of being outcaste is vivid in the narrator’s mind. Even as Tethi is granted entry to the inner sanctum of the house, young Thankam runs away and locks herself up in a room and refuses to come out. Even her pleading mother cannot reconcile her to her enforced marginality in her father’s household. The new bride, on the other hand, finds herself alone and isolated in the orthodox world into which she has married. She misses the casual conversation of her old home, the avid *political discussion*, the freedom to read newspapers and magazines. After one visit home, she returns to the *Mana* and finds to her horror that her box was prised open and her precious stack of magazines and newspapers carried away. All she is permitted to read in her husband’s home, she complains bitterly to the young Thankam, is the *Ramayana* and *Seelavathy*, the latter a devotional tale of a wife so loyal that she perpetually bears a crippled husband on her back. Thankam ponders her sister-in law’s lovely eyes. They once ‘*blossomed in light*’ and were now ‘*drowning in darkness*’ (P.34). Tethi writes to her nationalist brother P K P Namboodiri to the desperation at a life ‘*bastilled by marriage*’. He interprets her discontent not an isolated, crazy event, bound by the rim of her own consciousness but as part of the larger political unrest rocking the country. When her brother is imprisoned by the British, the Namboodiris considering him polluted turn him into an outcaste and Tethi bears the shame and horror of it all. She lies weeping by the toilet as the old *granny* (same as grandmother) curses her: “*Siva! Siva! Siva! Our young Namboodiris are such thoughtless people; they eat along with untouchables;*

they lose their proper perception; they even opt to go to jail; what a time! Oh! My dear God! Burst his head asunder"! (P.48).

After Tethi escapes from the *Mana* a photograph of her appears in the local papers. Under a caption that reads "*from darkness to light*" Thankam sees a dim image, a woman in a sari and blouse standing on a platform. The woman's words are clear, rhetorical, even the anger that had borne her from the threshold of the Namboodiri home flooding through the political aspirations that have permitted her a place in the Sun. At the time there is a beautiful conversation occurs between two persons when they see Antharjanam. They said: "*Is this a Namboodiri woman? I cannot believe it. Those women, who go about holding an umbrella, head bent, body fully covered. Will one of them have such courage*"? Another person said, "*Only they will have so such courage, because they have suffered quite a lot. Only a volcano can erupt and burst into flame like that*" (P.69).

And if her feminity refined, struck into the stern discipline of an ascetic's life, found strength by moulding itself to religious rituals that have prevailed for centuries, this other voice gathers the moral courage to spell out violation, mutilation, sexual bondage, the ferocity that can lie in the hearts of mothers and daughters. Lying on the cold earth near Varnasi, just as she had lain on the damp ground by the toilet in her husband's *Illam*, she cries out: "*Oh Earth! Who suffers everything? What all the stores in her inner mind's recesses. Black serpents, hard rocks, crores and crores of human civilizations and their ruins. The voices of the ages slumber there, Green surface with fire inside. Oh Sita! Mother of all human beings! You sought protection here. Please accept me also. Give me a place on your footstool*" (P.130). It is here that the notion of dharma enters in, the just moral duty, the sacred and appropriate task of a lifetime that dissolves even selfhood and identity. The novel after all had begun with the two old women, Thankam and Tethi, facing each other by the banks of the Ganga, all name, all place and station, even femaleness itself dissolved in the rushing spray of the river. At the very end of the novel '*Fire as Witness*' Tethi as Holy Mother hears a priest reading Valmiki Ramayana, discoursing on the scene in which Hanuman fears lest in the burning of Lanka, Sita too has perished. He consoles himself, in the words whose loveliness cannot mask the literal consumption to which the woman is forced, her life stuff turned to symbol: "*The beautiful lady, Endowed with her own inner glow she will not perish Fire cannot burn fire...By penance, honesty and chastity she might burnt the fire, but not the fire, her*" (P.141).

**Comparatively**, Nadine Gordimer's '*My Son's Story*' and Lalithambika Antharjanam's '*Fire as Witness*' have the similar aspects of socio-cultural, political and economical situations and conditions in their novels to prove the concepts. These novelists have faced gender based cultural, political and economical aspects in their novels in a similar manner. Culturally, politically and economically the female characters are suffered a lot in their society. Both writers have depicted their female characters are suffered by male dominated society. Their societies are based on '*colour*', '*caste*' and '*gender*'. We have found the '*Colour-bar*' differences in '*My Son's Story*' and '*Caste*' differences in '*Agnishakshi*'. The entire novel '*My Son's Story*' has depicted the descriptions of apartheid, anti-apartheid and colour-bar conditions and situations in it. '*My Son's Story*' is much concerned with such forms of ethnic identity that transgress boundaries, that is, the '*trans-ethnic*'

*identity* of 'coloured' people with their 'in-betweenness', 'ambiguity', 'doubleness' and 'transformation'. In its borderline situation, the 'coloured' family's movement signifies the 'flux' of ambivalence into the future of unpredictable ambiguities. In Gordimer's attempt at relocating 'coloured identity', the family's cultural mixture and non-categoriness evolve into new meanings and new subjectivities. By positioning Aila between home and the political world beyond home, Gordimer attempts to break down those fixed barriers of class, race and gender, and deals with them as dynamic categories. In Aila's, the boundaries between the private and the public, outside and inside become blurred and ambivalent. Novelist thus imaginatively creates a new space for women who are never afraid of crossing the rigid boundaries of *class, race, gender* and *politics*. Her creation of the 'coloured identity' and the 'coloured family' in flux is her new formulation of the interlocking relations between race, gender, and politics and her attempt to explore new racial, gender and political paradigms. By creating new forces in the identity of the *cultural hybrid*, Gordimer seeks to shape a new reality of South Africa in the time of social and political existentiality in the novel.

So, in these two writers, I have found out the similar conditions and situations of socio-cultural, political and economical aspects to prove the concept of modern realism and existentialism in their novels. Comparatively, 'Agnishakshi' has also depicted the descriptions of 'caste' and 'gender' conditions and situations in the novel. In the novel 'Agnishakshi' we have found the caste, gender, and ethnic differences in the families. We have seen colour and sexual difference in the novel 'My Son's Story' and caste, gender and sexual differences in 'Agnishakshi'. Black and white people problems are in 'My Son's Story' and Nayar and Namboodiri caste problems in 'Agnishakshi'. In these two novels 'colour-bar' and 'caste' conditions and situations are one side and other side gender problems are also there in those aspects.

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