



Tracing the History of Apartheid in the Select Novels of Nadine Gordimer

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Abstract

This study explores the history and evolution of apartheid in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* (1976) and *July's People* (1981). These novels were written against the backdrop of major political and historical events in South Africa. The writings of Gordimer portray the social, political, and cultural milieu of South Africa, where people from numerous communities reside. The plots of Gordimer's novels are mostly woven around the central theme of apartheid. As a white author of European origin, Nadine Gordimer portrayed the testimony of the subjugation and cruelty of Western colonizers against native South Africans. Gordimer was assertive against the inequalities of the apartheid regime in South Africa throughout her writings. In these two novels, Gordimer has demonstrated the atrocities of racial segregation against blacks and the lust for power in whites. This study examines the origins and gradual development of apartheid in South Africa, using the given facts and selected novels. The paper has investigated the calamities of liberal whites who supported the anti-apartheid movement.



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Gordimer is the representative of the people of her country and a supporter of humanity at large. In her writing, racism and poverty among African communities have been exposed. She feels that her birth of European descent has isolated her fatally and that the terrible violence against Black people is the only thing she can expose. With her deep understanding of South Africa, a writer like Gordimer can convey the country's reality and the black populace's actual suffering. It requires a lot of courage to portray the harsh reality of society in the writings of any writer. By all odds, she depicted the exploitation and discrimination in her writings. She decided to stay in her country, though the authoritarian government banned her novels. As a political activist, she worked for the equality and liberty of the Blacks and minority groups in South Africa. Gordimer has also faced resentment from a handful of black activists because she was a white African. In South Africa, history has been purposefully created to uphold white supremacy, and communication has contributed to the subjugation of people. White South African minorities held effective control of the country during the apartheid era.

The literary genius of Nadine Gordimer led her to the core of anti-apartheid activism, producing a body of fiction that brought her the greatest literary honour, the Nobel Prize, in 1991. It was just a coincidence that when she started writing, the Afrikaner-dominated National Party ascended into power and remained in power for almost 50 years. Gordimer, in a conversation, described herself as an instinctive writer because she began writing in her early childhood, when she knew nothing about politics or apartheid: "I write about people who happen to live under that system" (Boyers et al., 1984, p. 27). In one of her essays entitled "English-Language Literature and Politics of South Africa" she considers writers to be "the creative consciousness of the society in which they live" (Gordimer, 1976, p.142). A writer inherits so much of the raw material from the society to which he/she belongs. Gordimer believes that a writer should always be dutiful to his country and people. In her essay, "A Writer's Freedom," Gordimer says that the primary concern of a writer is always, "to write the truth as he sees it" (Gordimer, 1975, p. 47), and his central motif should be the "enlargement of the reader's apprehension of reality" (Gordimer, 1975, p. 47). From the completion of this responsibility, the writer proposes his "unique contribution to social changes" (Gordimer, 1975, p. 47).

Gordimer implies that a writer should always be vocal against the persecution of blacks in their writings. Every society has constraints and complications that a writer should address through his artistic creation. Sometimes a writer can create social conflict through his writing, but mostly it would be beneficial for social reconciliation. If there is a conflict while writing, the writer should extricate it by practising his primordial freedom as a writer. As Gordimer rightly mentions in "*A Writer's Freedom*", a writer should always have the "right to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds his society" (Gordimer, 1975, p. 45). Gordimer's writings are a reaction to the historical circumstances of South Africa. Simultaneously, she preserves her determination that fiction should contain a sense of veracity. Most of Gordimer's writings are a sheer reflection of the socio-political situation under the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Although South Africa's apartheid officially started in 1948, its origins may be traced back to earlier racial policies and colonial practices. It was typified by a legal and social structure that guaranteed the white minority's supremacy over the black and non-white majority, severely restricting the black's rights and liberties. Early policies and practices created the foundation for

racial segregation. For example, land statutes prohibited land ownership based on race, while passing laws that restricted the movement of black Africans. Apartheid's origins can be found in the colonial era when Britishers and Dutch settlers established dominance over the area, resulting in racial hierarchy and land confiscation. When the National Party came into power in 1948, it formally imposed apartheid and passed legislation to reinforce racial segregation. In South Africa, police and military forces were employed by the apartheid government to quell opposition. This includes deploying forces against demonstrators, arresting leaders, and outlawing opposition groups. In fact, "apartheid had made it impossible to even speak of a South African culture or society without defining it in terms of racial discrimination" (Padhi & Dash, 2004, p. 6). The term 'apartheid' was not used until 1946. In 1948, elections were scheduled, and it was anticipated that General Jan Christian would be re-elected. In a campaign address on March 29, Dr. Daniel Francois Malan used the term 'apartheid' for the first time as a strategy of racial connection. His speech was,

The [Nationalist] party, therefore, undertakes to protect the white race against any policy, doctrine or attack which might undermine or threaten its continued existence...The party believes that a definite policy of separation (apartheid) between the White races and the non-White racial groups, and the application of the policy of separation also in the case of the non-White racial groups, is the only basis on which the character and the future of each race can be protected and safeguarded and in which each race can be guided so as to develop its own national character, aptitude and calling. (Tiryakian, 1960, pp. 685-686)

Therefore, Prime Minister Malan used the phrase 'apartheid', "as the policy to ensure the safety of the white race and Christian civilization" (Padhi and Dash, 2004, p. 216). Dr. Malan created the term 'apartheid' to get the support of white voters because he was anti-Black African. He made the white electorate fearful of Africans. In order to win the majority of votes and emerge victorious, the Nationalist Party consequently took a harsh stance against non-white people. Thus, apartheid was the reason the Nationalist Party won the 1948 election, which, according to Edward A. Tiryakian, was "fought over the Native question, and apartheid as a political slogan" (Tiryakian, 1960, p. 691). The apartheid system separated and subjugated non-white South Africans. As a result, the minority white population subjected the majority of black people, who made up 85% of the population overall, to the most heinous forms of subjugation.

The novel *Burger's Daughter* was written against the backdrop of the anti-apartheid revolution. Many historical events and people, such as the Soweto Uprising and Nelson Mandela, were directly or indirectly associated with the novels. The novel is set in South Africa between 1948, when the Afrikaner-dominated National Party came to power, and 1976, when the Soweto Uprising occurred. This novel was subsequently banned in South Africa in 1979, as Gordimer points out, the reason for the ban, "flagrantly crossed the line to illegality" (Bazin & Seymour, 1984, p. 142). Gordimer wrote this novel during the period when, in South Africa, the whites were incessantly exploiting blacks. The human rights violations in the country were at their peak. Law and the police were also completely opposed to civilian rule. In *Burger's Daughter*, Gordimer believes that apartheid is "the dirtiest social swindle the world has ever known" (Gordimer, 2000, p. 349). There was barbarity, anguish, and delinquency pervading the society, which could be sensed with the helplessness of Rosa's 'virtual' brother Bassie, who later changed his name to Zwelinzima, which in Afrikaans means 'suffering land'.

Through the character of Bassie, Gordimer portrayed the effect of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. Bassie had become hostile toward the family that had sheltered him after he became an orphan. This was the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement, which instigated blacks against discrimination against blacks in the country. This movement awakens blacks to fight for respectable recognition and existence in society. As Bassie grew up, his anger deepened towards whites. He burst out into a meeting where people were praising the contribution of Rosa's father, Lionel Burger's martyrdom. He expressed his disappointment over the fact that his father, Isaac Vulindlela, was killed in the apartheid struggle, but he never got the recognition like white activists did. There were thousands of other activists like Bassie's fathers who deserved recognition and fought and died anonymously. He asserted, "whatever you whites touch, it's a takeover....even when we get free, they'll want us to remember to thank Lionel Burger" (Gordimer, 2000, p.329).

Many anti-apartheid movements were going on where both whites and blacks were equally active. However, some groups of black organizations were not in support of whites in the anti-apartheid movement. Few blacks considered that apartheid was only against the ease of blacks, so only blacks were allowed to protest and fight against it. These movements hurt a few white liberals who were in support of anti-apartheid struggles and the liberation of blacks. For Gordimer, the Black Consciousness Movement has provided a platform to express the grief and troubles of black people in South Africa. As Edward Powell said about Gordimer, she "sympathized with the movement's searing critique of liberal whites, who were accused of paternalism, complacency, and a lack of genuine commitment to pursuing meaningful change in South Africa" (Powell, 2017, p. 3).

Rosa believed that there was a mutual participation of all races in the freedom struggle of South Africa against apartheid rule. There were movements such as the Black African Movement and the Black Consciousness Movement, which were only for the support of blacks. But still, Rosa believed that brotherhood between blacks and whites couldn't be diminished. Gordimer, too, was concerned that the eradication of apartheid is not possible without the mutual participation of all the ethnic groups of South Africa. As Sharanya Ganguly asserted:

Sexuality and bodily union, resentment, conflicting ideologies, friendship, betrayal among the races all serve as a symbol for this combined struggle for the future of South Africa, where black and white individuals not only complement each other, they make the purpose of the Anti-Apartheid movement complete. (Ganguly, 2017, p. 215)

This novel has focused extensively on issues of African consciousness. This was the first novel, probably, which was not only limited to the detriments of blacks due to racism and apartheid, but also the issues of Whites and their issues have been justified by Gordimer.

The novel *July's People* was written and published in 1981, during the apartheid era in South Africa; Gordimer set the novel in post-apartheid times. The novel prophesies the inexorable decline of the white population in South Africa and the emergence of new social and political forces that would question the autonomous authority of whites. *July's People* received strong critical acclaim for its explicit depiction of the lives of black and white people in adverse circumstances. Through her depiction, Gordimer unearths some interesting dimensions of South African society. Though this novel was written at the peak of apartheid, it dealt with the imaginary issue of post-apartheid relations between whites and blacks. The novel predicts a

chaotic future for South Africa, in which blacks will be in a commanding position, unlike today, when whites dominate. The plot of the novel reveals that apartheid has been completely eradicated with the militia help of the neighboring countries, which led to the ultimate victory of the blacks of South Africa. As Gordimer pointed the tumultuous scenes in *July's People*:

It's a war. It's not like that, any more...the blacks have also got guns. Bombs (miming the throwing of a hand grenade). All kinds of things. Same as the white army, everything that kills. People have come back from Botswana and Zimbabwe, Zambia and Namibia, from Mozambique, with guns. (Gordimer, 2017, p. 142)

The novel retraces the tendency toward chaos in the country's political and social spirit. The title of the novel emphasizes the inconspicuous and sarcastic nature of relationships in the book. Stephen Clingman, one of the major critics of Gordimer in his book entitled *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, noticed the prime attempt of Gordimer to consolidate the position of blacks in two of her most acclaimed novels, *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People*. As Clingman points out:

Whether there can be a role for whites in the context of Soweto and after, and what the practical implications of such a role might be. The two novels are in some ways very different; Rosa Burger, in *Burger's Daughter*, comes from an official and conspicuous political tradition; Maureen Smales, in *July's People*, is amongst the most ordinary of Gordimer's characters, politically considered. But the underlying themes of the two novels unite them, at the same time suggesting new developments in Nadine Gordimer's consciousness of history. (Clingman, 1999, pp.171-72)

Stephen Clingman sees *July's People* as "subjecting the features of white bourgeois culture in South Africa to a radical and penetrating analysis" (Clingman, 1999, p. 107). This scenario mentally alarmed whites about their future. Gordimer herself premediated the upcoming position of whites in South Africa, and she speculated that apartheid cannot remain in the country for long, as she laid out in her memoir *Telling Times*:

The white who has declared himself or herself for that future, who belongs to the white segment that was never at home in white supremacy does not know whether he will find his home at last. It is assumed, not only by racists, that this depends entirely on the willingness of the blacks to let him it. (Gordimer, 2011, p.382)

Displacement, apartheid, language barrier, race discrimination, gender inequality, and identity crisis are some significant issues that have been pointed out in the novel. The black revolution has given the freedom to blacks to normalise their lives with daily activities like working with the family, lack of privacy, and many more. The displacement of a white family from the comforts of the city to the destitution of July's village causes conflicts and psychic disruptions between whites and blacks. Novel answers to the various questions of natives who were dispossessed of their land and fought hard to prove their existence in their very own place.

From every angle, one thing is quite evident in Gordimer's novels: they are an honest documentation of the irresoluteness of both whites and blacks. In her fiction, the plight of liberal whites has been shown, of which Gordimer herself was a victim. Some blacks, like Basie from the novel *Burger's Daughter*, consider white liberals responsible for the exploitation of blacks. She has been critical of both mentalities. She has made clear why she supported the anti-apartheid movement as she says in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, "my novels are anti-apartheid, not because of my personal abhorrence of apartheid, but because the society that is the very stuff of

my work reveals itself...if you write honestly about life in South Africa apartheid damns itself” (Bazin& Seymour, 1984, p. 83). Gordimer promises attention to the black community to affirm their human dignity in the present phase of human liberation. In her writings, one could easily find her trying to pave a possible alternative white role in the future through liberal humanistic responsibility. According to Gordimer, white South Africans need to embrace the ideals of the country’s dominant ethnic group to redefine their identity. They have to adapt to the philosophy, language, and values of the place they have designated as their native land. She is opposed to telling Black people how to fight for their rights and what kind of South Africa should look after apartheid. However, she feels entitled to tell and frequently does, telling other white people how they should adjust in South Africa. She wishes to enlighten white people about apartheid’s moral and human costs through her writings, as well as to help them understand their role in the post-apartheid world.

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