

## **Reimagination of Political Perspectives in *Burger's Daughter***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the influence of political circumstances in South Africa on the life of the author Nadine Gordimer. Gordimer is considered as a towering figure in South Africa who was an active participant in important historical events and a member of The African National Congress. Nadine Gordimer terms politics in two distinct ways, defining it not only as a historical event influencing the phenomenal world of real people, but also the events prevailed in the fictional politics of South Africa and as such is the only threshold necessitating the dramatic conflict of character localized by Nadine Gordimer. During the last sixty years of her life, Nadine Gordimer was a distinguished speaker for the rights of black people in South Africa and a spokesperson against Apartheid and its harmful practices. Her works express the psychological vibration of the whole nation, not just its privileged section, and the story of her characters delineates the strongest currents of South African national history and politics. Her novels propose action instead of passivity; fight, resistance and change instead of social blindness and inertia.*

**Keywords:** *Nadine Gordimer, Politics, Apartheid, Activism, Reimagination, Communism.*

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*Burger's Daughter* is an appropriate point of departure from the rhythm in which Gordimer has produced her novels after 1960; *The Late Bourgeois World*, *A Guest of Honour*, and *The Conservationist* explore characters' sense of commitment to the issues of race and identity in their South African life whereas *Burger's Daughter* focuses on the processes of personal and public struggle that the protagonist and her family have to experience in their fight against apartheid. One after another, these novels retrace the intensified impact of apartheid on characters in their everyday life. They feel themselves trapped and crushed between the white and the black worlds, torn apart by the pressure to survive in harsh environment in the 1960s and 1980s.

With the aim of establishing a contrast with the *Conservationist's* attitude, Gordimer more frequently writes about those men and women who fight against apartheid and try to narrow the gap between blacks and whites. These activists, known well to the author, believe in transformation and want to *shake things up*. Gordimer is very close to them and at the same time acutely aware of the dangers occasionally inherent in their idealism. Her writing can be viewed both as an endorsement and a critique of activism. This applies particularly to communist activists who were among the first to reveal their support for black rights in South Africa. Interestingly, *Burger's Daughter*, which was published in 1979, traces three *dialectic* movements within communism, first through the portrayal of Rosa's parents' generation, then that of Rosa's generation, and finally that of Rosa herself alongside the former two very distinct attitudes. Coming after *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter* is an ambitious novel which does not merely contrast two political attitudes, but also demonstrates the need to take a long-term view of history (in this instance, two generations).

*Burger's Daughter* juxtaposes two narratives: the idealized history of the father-hero, Lionel Burger, citizen of Africa, and the private story of the daughter, Rosa Burger, citizen of the people, citizen of the future. In Lionel Burger, Gordimer has created a figure that embodies not only the political praxis of the Communist community, but also the organic healing humanism of medicine. The political struggle in South Africa is, in part, translated into a model of disease. Lionel Burger, as a white Afrikaner, a member of the generation of the ruling race that constructed apartheid, attempts to secure the disease his people have caused. By the time he dies, however, the struggle has gone beyond the efforts of whites to 'cure' the situation and has been taken over by the blacks - Soweto marks the turning point in *Burger's Daughter*. The struggle passes into the hands of the children and is reframed in terms of political conflict, no longer in terms of the suffering that comes from illness.

Rosa, daughter of apartheid (born in the year and the month that the National Party which institutionalized apartheid came to power, is positioned on the margins of the struggle. Whereas Lionel was a leader and a healer (a Christ-like figure), Rosa provides palliative services, rehabilitating the wounded rather than curing the disease.

The novel explores the fusion of the political and private lives through Rosa's attempts to separate the two by trying to 'defect' from her father and that entire he represents. However, though the novel is infused with his story, it also partially refuses the determinations of history in a politics of 'place'. When Rosa returns to South Africa, she takes her place like anyone else, not like a hero, and inhabits her name in ways unforeseen by her father, she recognizes her own history. Though she rejects the imperatives of her father's history, Rosa accepts the imperatives of her own historic allocation in a powerful image of rebirth: 'The old phrases crack and meaning shakes out wet and new.' She is Rosa Burger, not simply "Burger's daughter". Ironically, though her discourse is Marxist, Rosa's positioning of herself is compatible with liberalism. Again, using the process of metaphor, she takes her place 'like anyone else'. What Rosa refuses is the inevitability of her 'destiny', an inevitability - in the eyes of the state, liberals like Conrad, the Party faithful - determined by her 'place' as Lionel Burger's daughter (familial and political history combined). Instead she accepts responsibility for her place, her Location, a responsibility marked by her recognition that "Nothing can be avoided .... No one can defect" (332).

By the time Rosa becomes an adult, activism already has a long history. In order to understand what she feels in this regard, it is necessary to know what occurred previously. This is both because Rosa defines herself by what her parents were, and also because the political context itself has changed. Rather curiously, from an activist's standpoint, the novel is constructed like a vast vacuum between two plenums (the second of which, the doorway to the future, is merely touched upon), and spans almost a decade, from the end of the Sixties to the late Seventies.

As an activist, Burger's daughter, as her name indicates, is heiress to a weighty inheritance. Rosa Burger is her father's daughter, defined in the eyes of others by this filiations. However, the aim of the novel is to show that there is as much a break as there is continuity between these two generations. The very least that can be said is that, for as long as the novel follows her life, Rosa Burger does not take over her father's activities until his death in prison when she is about twenty years old. It is only right at the end of the novel, when we are told very briefly that she too is now in prison, that Rosa can be likened to her father. This is in spite of the fact that, after her parents' death, when she becomes the main protagonist, she affirms quite the contrary by refusing to follow in their footsteps.

Although her father has dedicated the whole of his life as a communist activist to the black cause, Rosa rejects all forms of underground activity, however minor. When Rosa's friend Claire asks her to steal the key to the photocopying room from her boss, Rosa refuses, even though Claire's parents were comrades in arms with her father Lionel. On a broader level, the book demonstrates through its two protagonists – father and daughter – the seriousness of the irreversible, generational divide that occurred among white South African liberals in the late Sixties and early Seventies.

In order to make this concept clearly intelligible, Gordimer has had to be very precise in positioning her protagonists in time. This she achieves by freely drawing inspiration from a real-life persona, Bram Fischer, whom Gordimer chose as the subject of several of her essays before incorporating him into her fictional writing.

Here is what we know of Lionel Burger, the fictional counterpart of Bram Fischer. Born on 20 November 1905, he completed his studies in Pretoria and Johannesburg towards the end of the 1920s. In the early 1940s he and his first wife Colette were activists in the Communist Party. He had a son with Colette, whom he then left to marry Cathy on 19 August 1946, and two years later, in 1948, she gave birth to Rosa, or officially Rose-Marie. She was named Rosa after Rosa Luxemburg, but Marie after her Afrikaner grandmother. Lionel Burger's story follows closely that of the political struggle in South Africa. From 1950 onwards his militant activities went underground after the official dissolution of the Communist Party. In 1957, Lionel and Cathy were both charged in the Treason Trials. Prison stays played a large part in their lives. Indeed, the novel opens with a scene where we see Rosa at age fourteen, waiting amongst the crowd in front of the prison where her mother is being detained. This scene takes place in 1962, the same year that Nelson Mandela was arrested, two years before the Rivonia Trials which culminated with the nine accused being sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island, the penal colony that has since become famous as a result. The whole of Rosa's adolescence is thus painfully and intimately marked by the effect political repression has on activists who, like her parents, fight for the black cause. Her mother, Cathy, dies of multiple sclerosis and her father, sentenced to life imprisonment, dies in the second month of his third year in prison. In 1968, at the age of twenty, Rosa is alone, and even though she displays no outward sign of it, her distress is easily imagined; indeed, her close friends advise her to go either to Tanzania, a black African socialist country, or England, where she could join up with a number of fellow South Africans in exile.

Rosa, however, is not yet ready to make a decision of such magnitude; she must first stay to mourn the death of a loved one. Her father's death means so much more

to her than simple emotional mourning and, aided by the general course of events, Rosa gradually becomes aware of this fact. For many of his generation, Lionel's death is also the death of a belief, a hope and an illusion – everything that communism stood for to a man like Lionel, a distinguished and exemplary representative of the best and most humanly admirable traits of the previous generation.

After Lionel Burger and his wife, Cathy Burger's death, their daughter, Rosa wishes to stay away from what she has been doing so far, that is, secretly working for her imprisoned parents to carry out their mission: "I had not spoken [ ... ] but I felt - can't explain - released from responsibility for myself, my actions" (208). Instead of relieving her from sense of commitment, Rosa's journey to Europe sends her back to the same world of responsibilities because she realizes that "I am the place in which something has occurred" (8). Being Lionel's daughter and an advocate of human rights, it is not possible for her to keep herself away from being involved in the politics of her South African world.

In Rosa's desire "to know somewhere else" (185), that is, to go away from South Africa, Gordimer projects the devastating capacity of apartheid to break down people psychologically. In her departure, Rosa admits her inability to take any longer the injustices people live through in her South Africa. The sight of a beaten donkey on the road helps her to define her misery:

I didn't see the whip. I saw agony. Agony that came from terrible centre seized within the group of donkey, cart, driver and people behind him. [ ... ] Not seeing the whip, I saw the infliction of pain broken away from the will that creates it; broken loose, a force existing of itself, ravishment without the ravisher, torture without the torturer, rampage, pure cruelty gone beyond control of the humans who have spent thousands of years devising it (210).

Rosa notices that the pain was no shock to the donkey. She didn't stop the black man from beating the donkey, though she could have stood between them and the suffering - the suffering of the donkey: "What more can one do?" (211) Rosa reflects: 'If somebody's going to be brought to account, I am accountable for him, to him, as he is for the donkey.' Rosa leaves South Africa because she doesn't "know how to live in Lionel's country" which is a world of rigid boundaries. (213) Brandt Vermeulen, Rosa's influential contact in the Afrikaner government reveals to her how much South Africa has been beleaguered by hostile states on her own borders: it imprisons and detains only those who actively threaten her safety from within. As an Afrikaner, Brandt believes in 'ethnic advancement, separate freedoms, multilateral development, plural democracy.' Therefore, Rosa contacts him in "a place where a meeting is possible between those for whom skin is an absolute value and those for whom it is

not a value at all” (195). Rosa and Brandt don’t make their meetings public for the fear of their respective communities. They don’t trust each other’s friends either. They know that South African society divides them in restricted social identities. Rosa finds her way out of this confined South African world, and manages, with Brandt’s help, to get out of the country after her parent’s death in prison.

In order to bring Rosa out of her marginality in her South African world, Gordimer makes her visit Europe, the world outside and then brings her back to the same life but with broadened sympathy and understanding of the apartheid situation this time. During a gathering held by women organization for human rights in South Africa, Rosa finds the attitudes of the participants “too comfortable - too marginal” (201) towards the problems of their country. Till then, Rosa has been looking for personal freedom in her South African world which, she realizes, is not possible until she fights back against the apartheid system in her society.

In *Burger’s Daughter*, the refusal to comment on or engage in new discourse is conveyed through an abrupt change of scenery: without warning the novelist transports us from London to South Africa. It is left to the reader to decipher where s/he is now and which place Rosa is talking about. Yes, Rosa has decided to return to her country and make herself useful in practical terms. In the hospital in which she works, she helps people to learn how to walk again. Although firmly rooted in reality, this is a symbolic occupation. The South Africa that people like Rosa strive for can only be built very gradually; people must learn how to move it forward with infinite patience in the same way that a person with motor disability is taught to walk: “They put one foot before the other” (344). In all likelihood some of the patients are incurable, but others will learn one step at a time.

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