

Racism and Cultural Conflict in Burger's Daughter : A Novel by Nadine Gordimer

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Abstract

Burger's Daughter (1979) is one of the few truly great political novels that have ever been written. Gordimer describes it as a "coded homage" to the Afrikaner lawyer Bram Fischer, who defended Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists. It is narrated by the daughter of the central character, who faces the consequences of her parents' martyrdom for their political ideals. It was one of several Gordimer novels to be banned by the South African government, prompting her to issue a pamphlet protesting the censorship, What happened to Burger's Daughter.

Keywords: *Anti-apartheid, Racism, Detachment, Political activist, "The blackman is not fighting for equality with whites. Blackness is the blackman refusing to believe the whiteman's way of life is best for blacks."*

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Introduction

Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) a towering literary figure of South Africa, is of British and Jewish descent. She is a writer, political activist and recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature. Her writing deals with moral and racial issues, particularly [apartheid in South Africa](#). Her novels concern the devastating effects of apartheid on the lives of South Africans—the constant tension between personal isolation and the commitment to social justice, the numbness caused by the unwillingness to accept apartheid, the inability to change it, and the refusal of exile. In her works, she deals with political issues, as well as the moral and psychological tensions of her racially divided home country. She has successfully depicted the contemporary reality in fiction in artistic terms. The novelist by holding a mirror to South Africa's political, cultural and emotional attitudes represents the language of the people, their culture and tradition by introducing new avenues of experience for the readers.

Virtually all of Gordimer's works deal with themes of love and politics, particularly concerning race in South Africa. Always questioning power relations and truth, Gordimer tells stories of ordinary people, revealing moral ambiguities and choices. Her novels offer an insight into the most crucial period of South Africa's history. As a white South African writer, the contribution of Gordimer to the liberation of the Blacks is remarkable. Gordimer's writing career to date has run in matching with the apartheid era in South Africa. During this era, the racist government of South Africa was systematically intensified through racial laws and brutal control after the election to power of the Nationalist Government in 1948. Apartheid was a political programme of separate development subjecting the natives to be inferior to the whites. Actually, the fact is that Gordimer explicates the necessity of the anti-apartheid struggle as self-evidence in her novels. She also begins to explore the implications for her characters to reflect the struggle against apartheid.

Nadine repressive work has consistently responded to the history of her country, and with the publication of Burger's Daughter in 1979, she spans action ranging from the 50s through the 60s to the Black Consciousness movement of the mid-70s with the Soweto uprising occurring towards the end. Once again, she introduces a demand for action and commitment into her analysis of the complexities of white involvement in apartheid politics.

In Burger's Daughter, she examines the ethical dilemmas and choices that confront those who are born into the tradition of white political resistance. Rosa is a daughter of prominent white activists, Lionel and Cathy Burger, both of whom suffer imprisonment and who have dedicated their whole lives to the cause of freedom and

justice for the oppressed. Rosa, being their daughter is shaped by an ideal of service and self-sacrifice. The narrative unfolds through Rosa's unspoken conversations with three auditors- Conrad, her ex-lover, who shows Rosa how much she has suppressed her emotional needs out of loyalty to the cause her family supports; Katya, Lionel's ex-wife who has retired from active politics into the pleasant self-indulgent life in southern France; and the third section, Lionel Burger himself as Rosa returns to be jailed in the very prison where he served his sentence. Though Rosa cannot escape her inheritance, she feels the need to assess and define for herself what the commitment means for her personally. It may have led her to emotional repression and Rosa recalls the torment she required to make to the political prisoner Noel de Witt posing as his fiancée, a relationship in which her adolescent infatuation for him can find no expression.

Her conflicting feeling with regard to her heritage is brought to a head in the scene in which Rosa watches helplessly as a black man beats a donkey. This produces in her a sense of revulsion, for to intervene would mean asserting her "white" authority. The episode is also an intimation of the deep structure of violence which guarantees her white authority. It is a traumatic moment of bitter disillusionment. Her feeling of acute marginalization prompts her to withdraw from radical political activity and move to Europe. In her relationship with the married Bernard Chabalier, she experiences a brief interlude of intense personal fulfilment, but she soon realizes it for what it is- an irresponsible escapism.

The turning point comes when she suddenly receives a phone call from Bassie (little boss), the black boy who had been brought up with her almost like a brother. She is shocked at his furious repudiation of his pet name, and for the first time, she comes to know what his real name is- Zwezimlima ("suffering land"). The fact that her family's well-meant attempts at racial integration had merely served to suppress an individual identity, and that her acceptance of accolade as Lionel Burger's Daughter could be interpreted as complicity in the system of privilege and oppression, shakes her. Along with her friendship with Marisa Kgosana, wife of an imprisoned political leader, whose sensual perfection combined with keen intellect suggests a rounded political ideal, this leads her to a different perspective about the nature of her commitment to the revolutionary tradition in the context of the emerging Black Consciousness movement in the post-Soweto reality. She is impelled to return to her family's heritage of political activism and the implication is that for all liberal whites, a reassessment of their role in the anti-apartheid struggle is needed.

This brief survey of Nadine Gordimer's novels shows that as a novelist, she endeavours to create a portrait of reality that is human and has not been attempted

in history. In recreating freedom struggle of South Africa as a background to her novels, she skilfully blends history, politics and love in her fiction with a moral vision. Gordimer distils political events into personal pain which resonates through her writing. With an imaginative integration of private and public experience, she commits herself to describe a situation quite truthfully.

In Nadine Gordimer's Novels the personal, especially the psychological and moral, intersects with and is influenced by the political. In a society so politicized the relation of the political, and morality finds expression in terms of ideology and commitment. However, the strength of the novels has been their focus on the individual and on families and their awareness of the personal complexities, compulsions and ironies that are the sources of political consciousness and decisions. Since modern African literature has developed out of the colonial experience, it is sometimes wrongly assumed that generalization can be applied to the entire continent without taking into account the different cultural, historical and social background to each nation's writing. Such generalizations ignore the relative ability or inability of different tribal cultures to sustain and survive the colonial experience. Each region of Africa has had a different historical experience and this is reflected in the variety of literary models and themes. The literature of English-speaking Africa is independent of European intellectual movements. In English-speaking West Africa, where there was no settler class and independence was gained early, there is little explicit political protest in literature beyond the pan-African militancy found in Ghana. South Africa, on the other hand, has a long history of foreign occupation, settlement and urbanization which has resulted in de-tribalisation of the Africans. This led 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. The white writer of South Africa who are internationally known are Jack Cope, Dan Jacobson, Olive Schreiner, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer. When these writers refer to black protagonist, they do so as outsiders with an even more limited knowledge of the natives everyday experience than the black writers have. But the black writers are always between "The fear of expression and the need to give expression."

Apartheid had been her main subject throughout her career. She explored not merely its cruelty and dehumanizing effects on blacks, but also the costs of that cruelty and dehumanizing for the whites who superficially benefitted from it by law. She also examined the negative effects of apartheid even on those who opposed it,

such as white liberals, who dedicated themselves for the cause of blacks, the whites revolutionaries, who gave their lives to this mission. Apartheid has provided so much material for her fiction that cross-racial relationship becomes the main theme of most of her stories. While Gordimer has brilliantly mastered the short story, her novels, given the greater scope of the novel form, stand out for their lives to this mission. Apartheid has provided so much material for her fiction that cross-racial relationship becomes the main theme of most of her stories. While Gordimer has brilliantly mastered the short story, her novels, given the greater scope of the novel form, stand out for their exploration of life in South Africa in particular and in newly emerging African nations in general. Her first three novels and her early short stories document the inception and early years of apartheid. The works explore the insidious effects of an ideology grounded exclusively in skin colour and demonstrate its impact on all South Africans. In these texts we experience the traditional relationship between Prospero and Caliban in the acceptance within the European world and the native African margin. The idea of returning to England also finds open expression in the early works of Gordimer. In Gordimer's fiction, her white characters are questing for their individual identity and their Western-European selves as well. They are luckless Europeans who found only graves, not gain and glory in Africa. They all are taking a self-preservative flight into Exile, Isolation and Alienation. In one of her novels, *Occasion for loving*, Jasse Stilwell insists on seeing herself as "intact along." James Bray, the Englishman, in *A Guest of Honour*, returned to Africa to set up a modern educational system in the country, "fades away behind the insect-stained windshield of the car carrying him to a violent death." The Booker Prize winner novel *The Conservationist* is about the longing of Mehring, whom "no one'll remember where he is buried." Like E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, *My Son's Story* also indicates that once black and white stand on the same level, only then will healthy cross-racial relationship became possible: until then they remain complicit in the false consciousness which racial taboo engenders.

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