

None to Accompany me: The Truth of Fiction in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People*

APARAJITA DUTTA HAZARIKA

*Assistant Professor, Department of English
National Law University and Judicial Academy, Assam*

Dr. MANIKLAL BHANJA

*Professor, Department of English
Assam Don Bosco University, Assam*

Abstract

The principle of human rights is non-discriminatory in nature and it applies to everyone in relation to rights and freedoms. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of a list of non-exhaustive categories such as sex, race, colour and so on. The principle of non-discrimination is complemented by the principle of equality, as stated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Having witnessed the turbulent period of apartheid from close quarters, the author chose to enter the private spaces of her characters and narrate how human rights was violated and doom was forced upon the people by an insensitive ideology. Being a White woman writer as well as a political activist trying to write about the natives was not an easy task for Gordimer and hence the search for an identity, a self-confirmation, and a wish to belong existed in all her works. The present study shall try to analyse how the author combines the history of the apartheid and the anti-apartheid movement as well as autobiographical elements in her writings to present a chronological record of life in South Africa.

Keywords: *apartheid, human rights, discrimination, identity*

Introduction

Human rights are rights intrinsic to all human beings irrespective of their nationality, place of living, gender, nationality or ethnicity, colour, religion, language or any other status. Everyone is equally entitled to human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible. The principle of non-discrimination is complemented by the principle of equality, as stated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Gordimer in her *Writing and Being* (1991) states that her fiction would be more truthful than anything factual that she wrote. She notes the tension between standing apart and being involved which helps the imagination to transform both. She saw the unsettled period of apartheid from close quarters and as Gordimer states in her essay "That Other World That Was The World" from *Writing and Being*, South Africa in the early twentieth century passed from colonization from outside to perpetuated colonization within, in the form of white minority power over the black majority. Even though freed from British imperialism, South Africa was far from free. According to her the country became a police state based on the claim that the white skin of colonials was superior to black skin. Her novels are a chronicle of the saga of apartheid and the author chose to enter the private spaces of her characters and narrate the violation of human rights in the country. Being a White woman writer as well as a political activist trying to write about the natives, Gordimer explored in her writings the themes of identity, self-confirmation, and a wish to belong. She chose to spend her entire life in South Africa at a time when most people of her race took voluntary exile from South Africa. Through her novels, she explored the life of both the black and the white communities living a life of inequalities steeped in violence and hatred. Universal human rights are often expressed and guaranteed by law, in the forms of treaties, customary international law, general principles and other sources of international law. International human rights law lays down obligations of Governments to act in certain ways or to refrain from certain acts, in order to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals or groups. The principle of universality of human rights is the cornerstone of

international human rights law. This principle, as first emphasized in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948, has been reiterated in numerous international human rights conventions, declarations, and resolutions. The 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, for example, noted that it is the duty of States to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems. Apartheid is defined as “the state of being apart” under which the rights, associations, and movements of the majority black inhabitants were curtailed and Afrikaner minority rule was maintained. Nadine Gordimer demanded, through her fiction and her non-fiction, that South Africa reconsider the apartheid policy. Post-apartheid, Gordimer dreams of a future where there would be lesser disparities between the Whites and the black South Africans. Stephen Clingman in *The novels of Nadine Gordimer: history from the inside* observes that the novels of Nadine Gordimer provides a continual form of observation of the period in which she was writing which affords us a unique insight into the historical experience of that period.

Gordimer published her first short story at the age of fifteen. “I would have been a writer anywhere,” she said in an interview in 1990. “But in my country, writing meant confronting racism”. Her first published novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), takes place in Gordimer’s home town of Springs, Transvaal, an East Rand mining town near Johannesburg. The novel traces the growing political awareness of a young white woman, Helen, toward life in a small town and the systematic racial division in South African society. Gordimer herself explains this when she says in an interview with Pat Schwartz from *New South African Writing* that “With a first novel, one has lived so little one tends to draw on one’s own background” (Gordimer 79).

The novels of Nadine Gordimer are placed within the historical, political and sociological context of South Africa and the themes deal with social, political and economic issues.

None to Accompany Mewas published in 1994. The novel follows the idea of a Bildungsroman, as it traces the growth of the main character, Vera Stark in a new post-apartheid political environment. The plot of the novel was set during the early 1990s and marks the release of Nelson Mandela from prison. The novel concentrates on Vera Stark leaving aside her personal bindings to find what she feels

is her true self in a political cause which was fighting apartheid as a civil rights lawyer which also harks on the author’s role of an activist in the apartheid movement. Many people sided with the Blacks during the Apartheid and Nadine Gordimer took a rigid stance against apartheid. Interestingly, the author had admitted that she became aware of politics only after she saw that people were being affected by it. Her writings thus became her way of protesting against the Government policies.

To quote Clingman in his introduction to *The Essential Gesture Writing Politics and Places*, “If Gordimer is both insider and outsider, the question becomes: what is her status as an African writer?”. Nadine Gordimer’s position as a White minority amongst the wronged black majority was portrayed to some extent by the character of Ilse Wilson. The Burger family in the novel *Burger’s Daughter* (1979) was based loosely on the Fischer’s family and Lionel Burger on Fischer himself. Gordimer described the novel as a tribute to him. Fischer’s daughter Ilse Wilson acknowledged the similarities and noted that the author has very successfully described a situation without being a part of it. In an interview in the year 1980, Gordimer said that she was riveted by the role of the white Leftists in South Africa, especially Bram Fischer who was the Afrikaner advocate and Communist who was Nelson Mandela’s defence lawyer during his 1956 Treason Trial and his 1965 Rivonia Trial and that the seed of Burger’s Daughter took root from there. Gordimer was a friend of many of these activist families, including Fischer’s, and saw closely how the children were prepared for a life in politics and to look out for a period of hardship and struggle. The Soweto riots in 1976 which was happening at the time of her writing the book was also incorporated in it.

In *July’s People* (1981), Gordimer conceives a violence-ridden South African revolution, in which the white people find things disturbing and mortifying. They are hunted down and murdered after protests break out against the apartheid government. *July’s People* is set in an impending future in South African in which riots have erupted everywhere. With the support of mercenaries from neighbouring countries, ports are seized, airports are bombed, and all white people face an imminent threat to their lives. Bam and Maureen with their three young children, huddle in the back of a truck with their black servant, July in an attempt to flee Johannesburg. They

pack in a hurry, leaving behind many things but they bring Bam's bird rifle. After almost three long days of driving they come upon a rural African settlement where they adapt to a life of rustic dwellings amidst insects and rainstorms. They have to now be the guests of July, the black man servant who had served them for fifteen years.

In the essay titled "The Interregnum of Ownership in July's People" included in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer* Rosemarie Bodenheimer states "When Nadine Gordimer takes the Smales family to the South African bush in flight from a revolution they support, she deliberately invokes for the first time in her career the *Heart of Darkness* pattern of colonialist fiction"(108). The author then goes on to say that Gordimer's best achievement in *July's People* is to make the reader aware of the meanings, histories and uses of objects as they enter new sets of circumstances like the "yellow bakkie". One night soon after arriving, July takes the couple's truck—the bakkie—and drives away from the settlement with his friend. Fear alienates the liberated white woman, Maureen who feels herself trapped in the situation, and resents not only July but her family too. In the end, she runs towards the sound of a helicopter to encounter whatever fate has to offer, forsaking in the wake her husband and family. The novel explores how people learn to co-exist with violence stemming from race hatred in a powerful state machinery.

In "Living In The Interregnum", Gordimer insisted that blacks and whites even in their deeply divided country could write about one another under certain circumstances (*The Essential Gesture*, 297). Andrew Vogel Etti in *Betrayals of the Body Politic The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer* notes that sometimes the author herself acknowledges that she had been silent or perhaps unaware of injustices.

Conclusion

The novels are a chronological record of the truths of the period during the apartheid and also the interregnum period. In *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, Gordimer noted that it was not the "problems" of

her country that set her to writing; rather, it was learning to write that sent her "falling, falling through the surface of the South African way of life". Gordimer was a very detailed writer who was thoughtful and sensitive and explored through her writing the rather complicated relationships, both personal and social. The pain of racial discrimination and conflict faced by her people moved her very much and she became a champion for the cause of the people against the unjust apartheid laws. Her quote sums up what she wanted to say in her novels, "About the joys and the courage, I really don't know what other people think. I just know that I've never left Africa. I've lived there all my life. And one of the wonderful things, in spite of all the terrible things that happen in South Africa, is the way people continue to keep their dignity."

References

1. Bazin, Nancy T. and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds. *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, Jackson and London : University of Mississippi Press, 1990
2. Clingman, Stephen. "History from the Inside: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer" *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol.7, No.2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 165-193 Taylor & Francis
3. Clingman, Stephen. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside 1986; second edition*. London: Bloomsbury, 1993
4. Etti, Andrew Vogel. *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993
5. Gordimer, Nadine. *Burger's Daughter*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000.
6. Gordimer, Nadine. *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. Ed Stephen Clingman. London: Cape; New York: Knopf; 1988
7. Gordimer, Nadine. *July's People*. Penguin, 1982.
8. Gordimer, Nadine. *The Conservationist*. Penguin, 1983.
9. Gordimer, Nadine. *The Lying days*. London: Penguin Books, 1994