

HISTORY FICTION INTERFACE: REVISITING HISTORY IN NADINE GORDIMER'S BURGER'S DAUGHTER AND A SPORT OF NATURE

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an endeavour to revisit South African history in the Apartheid era, through two important novels of Nobel laureate author Nadine Gordimer. Her novels realistically capture the social, political milieu of the period and the immense impact historical movements have on the lives of racially diverse people inhabiting a common country. The struggle for power in South Africa has always been racially motivated, establishing white supremacy and dominion. While history documents, facts and archives events, social fiction of protest literature is an amalgam of the underlying affects and bearings such occurrences have on people. Such fictional history opens the door for alternative versions of historical storytelling. Alternative history is a path to understanding history beyond factual scholarship where history and fiction merge beyond defined demarcations of the real and unreal.

KEYWORDS: Apartheid, Alternative History, Soweto Student's Representation, Black Consciousness, Racial War, Reverse Racism, White Supremacy, Protest Literature

"If you want to know the facts of the retreat from Moscow in 1815, you may read a history book; if you want to know what war is like and how people of a certain time and background dealt with it as their personal situation, you may read *War and Peace*."

Nadine Gordimer (*The Black Interpreter*)

History, its production, circulation and documentation occur along with historical slippage, bias, prejudice, bigotry, omission and selection. Within a colonial and post-colonial narrative frame, the imperial baggage and its aftermath emerge as an obvious phenomenon. To counter such occurrences, alternative history has come to the forefront. Alternative history is fiction representing history in a different way, challenging the factual documentation of historical scholarship. Alternative history or rather fictional history does not simply mean 'the untrue' even though it is colored with imagination and tainted with the writer's perception. Gunter Grass had emphasized the importance of such alternative history; "writers experience another view of history, what's going on, another understanding of progress. Literature must refresh memory."⁽⁵⁾ Nadine Gordimer who dedicated her entire writing career in writing Anti-Apartheid fiction resorts to history in order to present context, setting, environment and milieu of the Apartheid era in South Africa. Through her version of the historical fiction, we get a glimpse of how memorable events in history transform the course of life of different characters, a panoramic view of society, comprising of people belonging to different ethnic groups. Gordimer had once said "I begin to think that my experience as a product of this social phenomenon has relevance beyond the personal; it may be a modest part of alternative history if pieced together with the experience of other writers." (*That Other World that was Home*). She further stated that novels like *War and Peace* tell us about individuals during the "retreat of Moscow" and their "personal situation". In her fiction too, we find how the personal lives of people intersect

the historical process and it bears immense consequences to them.

One major historic uprising that shocked the entire world and stirred Gordimer deeply is, The Soweto Students drive against 'Afrikaans medium decree', which forced all black schools to have Afrikaans as the language of instruction. The movement also culminated as a protest against other forms of injustice like Bantu Education and educational segregation. On 16th June 1976, the protest rally turned violent, and indiscriminate shooting by the police killed more than seven hundred students. The history is known to the world, but what Gordimer offers is the effect of this event on the lives of individuals, which is often slipped or missed out in factual detailing. She wrote in the New York Times about this massacre of young children and how this was only a 'pretext' for the white government to show supremacy over innocent black children, the real villain being the system of Apartheid:

The proverbial box of matches in the hand of a child has set the house on fire--the house, in which 18 million blacks are confined, the house whose walls and bars is group areas, influx control, job restrictions and pass laws. The Afrikaans language, associated with the police and Government officials, is indeed a "pretext," standing for wrongs as old as white supremacy. The agitator behind the revolt of the children is apartheid itself.(3)

In her novels like *Burger's Daughter* and *A Sport of Nature*, we find Gordimer mentioning the Soweto Students Revolution (SSR) and how it plays a pivotal role in social conditioning of racial inferiority. While *Burger's Daughter* discusses the event in process, the complicated socio political circumstances, violence and sacrifice of many, beyond divisions of color, *A Sport of Nature* published five years later talk about the after math of the violent revolution. Somewhere, the novels intersect and the characters, people, situations, events in Gordimer's fiction seem to overlap, merge and blend to create a fine version of alternative history. Similar and real characters, events and actions of *Burger's Daughter* have been mentioned several times in *A Sport of Nature*. Therefore, it is not wrong to perceive *A Sport of Nature* has an extension of the ideas and thematic concerns of *Burger's Daughter*. While *Burger's Daughter* end with the people of color including white protagonist Rosa Burger being detained by the state for aiding the student's revolt, *A Sport of Nature* depicts a time when the revolt is over, and it has both positively and negatively affected people's lives and a hope that Apartheid is soon coming to a closure.

Burger's Daughter contains a complete pamphlet of Soweto Students' Representative Council (S.S.R.C) in verbatim. Written with incorrect spellings and faulty grammar, the pamphlet criticizes the Soweto uprising and challenges the Apartheid government with another revolutionary outbreak. Rosa, we see is assisting the young black children and is subsumed within the struggle. She is concerned about the young black kids like their own mothers. She reaches out to the poor children handicapped by the violence and assists them to walk again through physiotherapy in a city hospital. Suddenly, in the trying times we see Rosa transforming from a sensual figure to a motherly, concerned figure:

...They say no one must break the boycott. And they'll do it...They don't listen to me or their mother...how d'you know every day they're going to come back alive ?-I don't know what I would do.- she was white, she never had a child, only a lover with children by some other women. No child but those who passed under her hands, whom it was her work to put together again if that were possible..."(345).

Rosa's comments on the Soweto revolution reflect the fact that she is now a matured individual and has a complete understanding of the socio political conditions of South Africa. In other words she voices Gordimer's thoughts on liberty, justice and political freedom for the blacks. She suggests that enough has been said and promised by political organizations, each endorsing a different ideology and modus operandi to fight out the system, without definite result. It was the right time, when children took up the real fight for the future of South Africa: "This time it's coming from the children of the people, teaching the fathers-the ANC, BPC, PAC, all of them, all the acronyms hastening to claim, to catch up, the theory chasing events." (348). Rosa also recalls how her father prophetically realized long before the actual riot what the general public was asking for. Gordimer's emphasis and analysis of the revolt through the character of Rosa reveals the chasm between ideological struggle and mass demand and mass struggle. She translates how people were losing faith in different versions of different leaders promising the Future yet not quite getting near it. So the youth took up the struggle and joined hands in the streets without the fear of the bullets:

...but they kept on walking towards the police and the guns. You know how it is they understand what it is they want...Rights, no concessions. Their country, not ghettos allotted within it, or tribal 'homelands' parcelled out. The wealth created with their fathers' and mothers' labor and transformed into the white man's dividends. Power over their own lives instead of a destiny invented, decreed and enforced by white governments..." (349).

Gordimer was criticized and her work was banned for propagating Anti- Apartheid movement by the Afrikaner government. In her defence Gordimer wrote an article 'What the Book is About' to counter and justify every point picked up by the commission:

I reproduced the document because my stylistic integrity as a writer demanded it: it is necessary part of the book as whole. I reproduced it because it is sometimes essential, for the total concept of a work of fiction, to incorporate blunt documentary evidence in contrast to the fuller, fictive version of events. (2)

Reading this comment, a reader can rightly decipher the realistic approach, truthful presentation of the scenario by Gordimer with the human touch which documents of history pages lack. When Rosa talks about the inadequacies of Bantu Education and its inferior quality we feel not only the pain and anguish behind the student's revolt but also the same desperation as the black kids, facing bullets for the right to education: "The kind of education the children've rebelled against is evident enough they can't spell and they can't formulate their elation and anguish. But know why they're dying." (349)

In *A Sport of Nature* on the contrary, the movement and its effect are discussed obliquely through a prison letter of Sasha, and there is no direct reference or description of the Student's Revolution. The narrative hints the possibility that the revolution is at its last stage and will soon be coming to an end. However, the closing years are not bereft of complications or impediments. In fact, the effect of the revolution highly complicates interracial relations and social conditions. After boycotting the Bantu Education system the blacks stopped attending schools to show solidarity to the Soweto Students Research Council (S.S.R.C). It was then a matter of pride and ego not to attend schools or coaching run by whites and completely refuse all kinds of charity or sympathy;

Happened to the smiling, grateful kids who used to come to free classes at the old church on Saturday or two... They boycotted the Bantu Education that made it necessary for them to receive white charity coaching; they got shot at tear gassed..." (334)

In such a condition, when blacks refused every kind of help from the whites, compassionate white people like Paula, having dedicated their entire lives in teaching black kids had nothing better to do but leave South Africa. It even resulted in a form of reverse racism, when Blacks hurled racial abuses at whites. Sasha, a young white man serving a prison for aiding the blacks resents and regrets such behaviour, yet at the same time realizes whites were still in a privileged, superior position than the blacks in the same nation. While black kids were facing the tear gas, bullets everyday white children were shielded from the idea of death itself. The disparity becomes evident in the following words of Sasha:

... Why should I be called a whitey? I didn't ever say 'kaffir' in my life...They boycotted the Bantu Education that made it necessary for them to receive white charity coaching, they got shot at and tear-gassed ...they've been funerals for many of them ...White kids don't even know what death is, we were kept away from funerals for fear of upsetting us psychologically(334)

But, the successive generations and the youth of the period remained uneducated and illiterate, which naturally barred them from taking up jobs or finding employment, other than those which involved physical labor.

In *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer also laments the insensibility of racial war, how people become numb to all kinds of feeling whether pain or happiness. There remain no guilt, no remorse and no onus, everything getting smashed and subsumed into the hatred of racial profiling, feelings of revenge and counter revenge. The violence that started with the Soweto Students Revolt created a mad frenzy amongst people of both races, feelings of hatred, and repressed desires for revenge and counter revenge lead to a kind of "color-blindness". Then people had lost all sense of reason and compassion only hacking one another out of deep-seated anger and rage. In such a situation all human identity gets lost in the swirl of the faceless enemy:

No one is on record for feeling of any remorse. Neither the police nor soldiers who shoot blacks every day, nor the blacks who kill- no, not their own people, which is what the whites are saying –but those who are not their own, anymore: who have lost all identity but that of enemies. There's color- blindness for you at last... (334)

Another major historical movement/event in South African Apartheid history that occupies considerable space and importance in Gordimer's novels is 'The Black Conscious Movement'. The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) was a mass Anti-Apartheid activist movement that appeared in South Africa in the mid-1960s out of the political void created by the imprisoning and banning of the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress leadership, especially after the Sharpeville Massacre. The BCM represented a social, political movement of political consciousness amongst the black people of South Africa. The Black Consciousness Movement is also synonymous with its founder, Steve Biko, a student leader of South African Students Organization (SASO) and the father of the movement. The following extract from his book *I Write What I Like* foregrounds the basic ideas of the movement:

Black Consciousness is in essence the realization of the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation- the blackness of their skin- to operate as a group in order to

rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the "normal" which is white... (2)

The BCM criticized what they saw as customary white values, especially the prejudiced, condescending values of white people. They refused to involve white liberal. Most importantly, it emphasized the rejection of white monopoly on truth as a central tenet of their movement. While it was a new consciousness rising, awareness oriented movement; it complicated the lives of people. Its complete rejection of white support or sympathy was viewed as another form of extremism and radicalism. The movement, its effect and consequence can be analyzed in the novels *Burger's Daughter* and *A Sport of Nature* by applying two different textual analyzing techniques. In *Burger's Daughter* since the entire discussion takes place as a debate and conversation between a group young people, Catherine Belsey's theory on interrogative novel may be applied. On the contrary, in *A Sport of Nature* the discussion on the Black Consciousness movement occur through the prison letters of Sasha with the narrative alternating between first and third person. The narrative thus voices the general perspective and author's viewpoint simultaneously. The points of intersection between the two novels ensue when Sasha links the Black Consciousness movement with the ideas of communist leader Bram Fischer and mentions Lionel Burger.

Catherine Belsey defines the interrogative novel as:

... In other words the interrogative novel refuses a single point of view, however complex and comprehensive, but brings a point of view into unresolved collision or contradiction. It therefore refuses the hierarchy of discourses of classical realism and no authorial and no authoritative discourse points to a single position which is the place of coherence and meaning. (13)

This theory of the interrogative novel presents dual perspectives of Black Consciousness among students and simultaneously the white and non-black perspectives. Since it is a conversation, as Besley points out, there is the refusal of a single point of view; in fact it helps to voice multifarious opinions on the movement. It must also have a coherent, transparent clear meaning, but the structure of arguments should be like a 'prism' from which different meanings can be generated as one continues to analyze. In Marisa Kgnosa's house we find a long polemic argument between veterans of the ANC, a white journalist endorsing the communist points of view and a young proponent of the Black Consciousness. What we witness is that even within the movement there are differences and fissures. Dhladla argues that Black Consciousness ideology is not in tune with the perspectives of the older people who are ready to compromise and their political ideas are inadequate as they still accept the slave status and look up to their masters to liberate them. Old Greer is more concerned about the capitalist, communist bourgeoisie effect. His views are that people who would only benefit out of the movement are the "promoters and businessmen"; the working class would struggle, die and remain within the lowest rung of society. The doubt remains, various subjects are opened up, tensions, and conflicting ideas may not bring out a solution, but they help us develop perspectives and widens experience. Besley also states the dialogue is not supposed to provide definite answers, solution or meaning to the questions raised. Gardiner too said "truth begins in dialogue" which is a quote from Nietzsche. In support of this argument critic Sakamoto writes that:

The dialogue occurs in Gordimer when there is no definite resolution, but continuous negotiations of moral and ideological positions throughout the process of development. This is because in the world, there is no certainty of a unified voice, or a consensus about social/moral values and principles.

Therefore, there is no single privileged discourse of the protagonist, but all conflicting ideologies and discourses are brought into question and negotiated from different positions and from various perspectives. (8)

In fact, since the characters in Gordimer's fiction speak without quotation marks, relying only on dashes and gaps it is impossible sometimes to decipher correctly which character is speaking when. It is perhaps a deliberate strategy to avoid making the statement's context specific and making them more universal.

The pike had written in his book that the movement "seeks to infuse the black community with a new found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook in life." (Biko 20) Following him closely, we see the Black Consciousness Movement completely rejected white liberal support and interference, preaching a kind of reverse racism. Blacks were now advised to be racist and unite under the black skin umbrella. No doubt it motivated and united the blacks, but it created another form of segregation, debarring the whites completely from the liberation struggle. Somewhere the idea of a common future for South Africa was fading into the creation of a black South Africa. It is at this point that *Burger's Daughter* and *A Sport of Nature* collide. We see the similarity of opinion between black consciousness revolutionaries in *Burger's Daughter* and Sasha a white prisoner in *A Sport of Nature*. Both establish liberalism's failure in relation to social realities and racial laws. White liberals have always been the master or the leader furthering the cause and black men their humble followers. It was time to turn the tables over. "Apartheid is breaking down strangely... The main other thing was changing... Blacks of all kinds and ages were deciding what had to be done and how to do it." (222). The following quote foregrounds the similarity in opinion and understanding between radical black revolutionaries and Sasha's prison letters:

Black revolutionaries said, Blackness is the black man refusing to believe the white man's way of life is the best for blacks. -... It is not a class struggle for blacks it is a race struggle. The main reason why we're still where we are is blacks haven't united as blacks because we're told all the time to do it is to be racist... White liberals run around telling blacks, it's immoral to unite as blacks, we're all human beings, it's just too bad there's white racism, we just need to get together, 'things are changing', we must work out together the solution... Whites don't credit us with the intelligence to know what we want! We don't need their solutions." (163)

Sasha also reasons why the blacks decided to unite under the racial bar and admit the failure of white communist liberalism and how the ANC only responded to what white liberals said. It is ironical that on one hand the campaign called black men 'brothers' and fellow comrades yet never thought it to be necessary to ask their opinion or endow them with leadership and equal opportunity of participation. Their continuous effort to negotiate with the white Afrikaner government did not bring any concrete transformation. The final let down was when the ANC could not convince and compel the Apartheid Government to bring an end to the violence inflicted on schoolchildren;

We whites do not know how to deal with the fact of this death when children in full knowledge of what can happen... It seems old white adversaries might be accepted, but white liberals will never be forgiven for their inability to come to power and free the blacks (Windows 65)

The breakdown or collapse of liberal ideas also occurs in *Occasion For Loving* (1963) and *The Late Bourgeoisie World* (1966). The Black Consciousness Movement started with a lot of conflicting designs between the old guards, the

new generation, the younger radicals and ancient liberals. Therefore the radical commitment for complete emancipation, independent of white help was a huge challenge, but Gordimer presents its future and its course of action in a positive light. The narrative stresses on the achievement of similar black revolution in neighbouring countries-“... the defeat of the Political colonized armies in Angola and Mozambique, the collapse of White Rhodesia, end of South Africa's occupation of Namibia brought about by SWAPO's fighters or international pressure, these are what they are waiting for.”(311)

In an article in the New York Times of May 31 entitled “The Race Barrier That Must Be Destroyed”, Pearl Buck, talks about her solution for the “race problems” arising in a multiracial colonized country (3). Observing the discrimination and exploitation of the colonial people and the resentment against imperialist domination, she asserts that the “colored man is no longer willing to endure his inferiority.” She concludes that in the future such colonized states must “hew out their course not according to past lines of race and empire but along new lines of common humanity and cooperative equality.”(4) But at no point in her long article does she explain what this “cooperative equality” is actually and how the masses and their colonial government should negotiate. Critics and social scientists have therefore questioned and tried to figure what exactly is this cooperative equality. ‘Cooperative equality’ could mean socialism. Or she could also mean Capitalism along the lines of American “democracy”. This assumption comes because she says it is United States, not Great Britain, which would in the future decide the destiny of the colonial countries.

Clingman defines fictional history as:

Fiction deals with an area of historical activity inaccessible to the sciences of greater externality: the area in which historical process is registered as the subjective consciousness of individuals in society, fiction gives history from the inside. (33)

CONCLUSIONS

In tune with this definition of Clingman, Gordimer with a career, spanning almost the precisely the entire hegemony of the Apartheid era, successfully presents with persistent rationality this alternative history “from the inside”. It is very easy for authors to get biased and opinionated when writing about a particular cause and theme. But, Gordimer maintains that perfect equilibrium in presenting actual historical events and the views, opinions, sentiments and thoughts of different, diverse people within the South African society. Therefore, the words rationality and judiciousness can be aptly applied to her fiction. Gordimer, by virtue of the circumstances around her channelized her art as an expression of protest against anti-human forces governing and controlling the lives of nonwhites in South Africa. Her novels beautifully amalgamate the history fiction interface and interaction articulating a balanced, non-violent, neutral and non-prejudiced protest literature.

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