

# Social Concerns : Race, Gender, Identity and Communal Spheres in Nadine Gordimer's Selected Novel

Tabassum Praveen  
PhD Scholar, Department of English,  
Patna University

## Abstract

*The society in South Africa remains an unequal society based on social class perspective. Even the authorities admit that the society is divided into the rich, middle class and the poor. These reflect the purchasing power of different classes. The rich continues to have economic advantage, the middle class are in high depth of debts, and the poor are trapped in poverty. Gordimer's novels are so valuable historically because they are so accomplished and developed as fiction. Connecting outer social reality and the inner self, Gordimer's works are concerned with "private reverberations of public occurrences". Her works are indeed artistic transformations of social reality. As a writer with social consciousness and a social activist who rose against anti-human establishment, Gordimer displays an unmatched skill in integrating the political moods of her society into the very form and texture of her fiction.*

*Nadine Gordimer's fictional characters embody unease and often resentment with social class, expected cultural roles, and place. In her fiction, the conflicting notions of space and self are tied to gender, class, and identity. Gordimer's characters are victims of circumstance, of birth, of place, but in addition to the feeling of exile linked to these factors, her fiction draws attention to female spheres, communal spaces, domesticity, and sexuality.*

*In my research paper, I propose to analyze selected fictional works (novels and short stories) by Nadine Gordimer. I will propose how Nadine Gordimer presented black people in her novels, their conditions and their ways of living. The questions I will thus investigate are: How do the black and white people deal with the Race, Gender and Communal Spheres.*

**Keywords:** Race, Gender, Identity, Social reality, Communal spaces, Apartheid

## INTRODUCTION

The term African Literature generally refers to a comprehensive, complex and creative literature of and from Africa. But different critics belonging to different schools of thought have provided varying interpretations about African literature. Chinua Achebe doesn't "see African literature as one unit but as a group of associated units in fact the sum total of all national and ethnic literatures of Africa." Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer believes that "African writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour ... who share the African experience and who have Africa centred consciousness". African literature may be classified into three distinctly and widely accepted categories- traditional oral literature of Africa, literature written in indigenous African languages and literature written in European languages. Africa in pre-colonial times was divided into various ethnic groups. During that period different communities developed distinct oral literature of their own. African Literature in English reflects various perspectives of local color and belongingness through multiracial, multicultural and multiethnic veracity.

Nadine Gordimer, the Nobel laureate is a white South African prolific writer. Gordimer believes in the humanistic aspect of people and is the spokesperson for her people. She won her Nobel Prize in the year 1991. She was recognized as a woman "*who through her magnificent epic writing has – in the words of Alfred Nobel – been of very great benefit to humanity*". Gordimer's writing dealt with moral and racial issues, particularly apartheid in South Africa. Under that regime, works such as *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* were banned. She was active in the anti-apartheid movement, joining the African National Congress during the days when the organization was banned, and gave Nelson Mandela advice on his famous 1964 defence speech at the trial which led to his conviction for life. She was also active in HIV/AIDS causes. Nadine Gordimer has spent the whole of her life in South Africa, where, from her childhood, she was a witness to the cruel segregation policy. One unassailable conviction that she nurtured from the beginning until the end of apartheid was the injustice of imposing racism.

Growing up in South Africa where only 5.6 million people are white out of a population of 37.9 million, Nadine Gordimer became increasingly conscious of her 'whiteness'. The colour of her skin instantly signalled 'oppressor' to black South Africans. Her whiteness imposed upon her a social and political identity that she rejected; yet, it was like a face she could not wash off, a mask she could not take off. African Literature forms a pivotal segment of the 20th -century world literature. It represents the writings of African national livings on African soil reflecting the African native issues related to race, gender, social, culture and identity. As she said in a 1978 interview, 'In South Africa one wears one's skin like a uniform. White equals guilt'. She often sought to separate her personal identity from that of her racial group in order to be welcomed rather than be shut out (or even shot) by those for whom whiteness signified 'enemy'.

*Race, Gender and Identity Issues in her novels.* The term 'African Literature' covers a huge range of languages, cultures, and colonial contexts. It reflects the cultural traditions, colonial history, and inner conflicts of African people. In the twentieth century, European narratives of Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, and Doris Lessing had produced distorted images of African people and their culture, but the African novelists rejected the distorted images and made an attempt to provide a true portrayal of African indigenous population and European people through specific symbols and myths.

Nadine Gordimer's fiction has long reflected images of her home country of South Africa. Throughout decades of writing, Gordimer depicted her own culture and the societal changes that occurred during and after apartheid. Her fiction focuses on exile, in terms of class, gender, and identity. Likewise, Gordimer's characters find themselves struggling with societal expectations as well as their own identity. Gordimer exposes the tension of gender roles and social class and explores the arbitrary nature of the patriarchal systems that aim to define her characters. Gordimer's collection of short stories, *Soldier's Embrace*, written during apartheid, and her post-apartheid novel, *The Pickup*, along with the lesser-known story "*The Second Sense*," highlight the possibilities that exist within gendered spaces, but also how these spaces are limited when one crosses the color bar. These works, though a small selection of Gordimer's vast output, illustrate a range of female spaces during apartheid (and the Immorality Act) and after apartheid during different periods of Gordimer's creativity.

Gordimer emphasises the role of children as torch-bearers of the future. Since, only in the younger generation lay the responsibility of creating a society that is freed from all inequalities, children and childhood has a potent place in Gordimer's novels. In *The Lying Days*, we witness little Helen's first hand experience of racial discrimination in the small mining town. The contrasts in the living conditions of the black and white children present the stark disparity in their upbringing. While Helen is lavished with good education, parties and enviable entertainments, her black counterparts live in dingy homes, wear tattered clothes and eat and play in the most unhygienic places. In *A World of Strangers*, Anna Louw takes the responsibility of looking after Urmila, the little sister of her former Indian husband. This act of the liberal-minded Anna is an extension of Gordimer's faith in nurturing children who are the stakeholders of the future.

Again, in *Burger's Daughter*, Rosa's future as a revolutionary is sowed in her very childhood. As a child, Rosa's daily exposure to the anti-apartheid struggle of her parents, sets off the spark that later draws her to follow her parents' footsteps. Her kinship with her 'black brother' Baasie is noteworthy. The Burgers make the black children of their neighbourhood play in their swimming pool. Baasie too spends most of his time with the

Burgers. Rosa looks back at her childhood and the sense of oneness she felt with Baasie. It is the latter's telephone call years later that shakes Rosa up from her indifference to the plight of her black brethren in her home country. Likewise, in July's People we find the Smales' children acclimatizing with their 'black friends' in July's bush village. Gina, Victor and Royce get used to the new environ without any inhibition. They play with the village children and eat and drink like them. Exposed to the crudities of living in a rural atmosphere, the children, ironically enough become immune to many infections.

In July's People, Gordimer does not simply expose the impasse to which apartheid condemned interracial relations. She equally envisions a utopian future in which South Africans try to overcome their intractable social and economic problems. The issue of identity has been presented with the changing dynamics in the relationship between the Smales family and July. In spite of being dependent on July for protection, shelter and other basic necessities, Maureen and Bamford continue to treat him like a servant, refusing to let go of their White privilege. July continues to serve them tea first thing in the morning like he used to and caters to all their needs. The Smales identify as liberal and claim to have treated their Black servant better than other White masters usually do, and yet Maureen continuously argues with July and grows suspicious of him when he keeps the keys to their vehicle. The irony and hypocrisy of claiming to be liberal is exposed in the stark contrast presented between the Smales' extravagant and luxurious house and July's family's primitive, poverty-ridden life in a hut in the village. In spite of claiming to be liberal, July's masters only gave him leave to go to his village once in two years and left him severely underpaid for all the services he provided. Racial identity hasn't just been presented in two ways of White and Black, but multiple identities within a single race exist. There are the pro-apartheid Whites who fought back against the rebels in the city, and the liberal Smales family who fled and supported the anti-apartheid movement, as Bamford also states his support for the Blacks in front of the tribal chief. Even among the Blacks, Gordimer presents two kinds of people. One kind is of those who mistrusted Whites and did not adopt their customs, mainly limited to the village areas, as exemplified by the tribal chief who only spoke and understood his own native language and not English, and the other by July's wife and his mother, who even states, "White people. They are very powerful, my son. They are very clever. You will never come to the end of the things they can do". The politics of race bring about mutual mistrust and xenophobia between the two races. On the other hand, there are Blacks who desire liberation and yet refuse to employ violence for the same, and prefer equality of the races rather than radicalism, like July's character himself. July's actions and ideas are reflective of Mandela's policy of forgiveness towards Whites.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, Gordimer builds a 'pattern of her own perception out of chaos' with an eye of a camera in her fiction. Gordimer gives a vivid account of this process of alienation and social severance in her fiction. She works both within and beyond the colonial experience to question the myth of an unbridgeable gap between the black and the white races: the white settlers cannot become part of Africa because their skin is white and their ways are essentially European. An examination of Gordimer's select novels using the sociological theoretical perspectives of conflict and self, leads us to draw the premise that the society and the individual personality are inter-linked and interdependent. Gordimer's protagonists, whose 'self' emerge through social interaction and conflicts, contribute to the society from which they have gained their unique identity. Sociology has helped the researcher gain a better understanding of the social world depicted in Gordimer's novels.

Nadine Gordimer's great themes are love, politics, race, gender and identity. Behind the most intimate relations, as well as the most public, there is the same search for an identity, a self-confirmation, and a wish to belong and exist. For Gordimer, the novel and the short story are instruments to penetrate a society that defends itself against scrutiny, hides in censorship and hypocrisy, refuses to recognise its history, and thus produces a grammar of lies where capitalism, liberalism, and Marxism mean the same thing: an onslaught on the folk. She enters people's most intimate regions to show how private life is violated by informers and race registers.

Nadine Gordimer combined in her life and literary career the creativity of her genius and the social commitment of her conscience. Her strongest political and personal statement on the obligations and ambiguities of, "living in the interregnum", synthesizes, codifies and transforms into her „world of fiction“ which ultimately becomes a meditation on responsibility and history. Finally, on July 13th 2014, at the age of 90, Gordimer rests her mighty pen leaving behind a rich and powerful literary legacy for the generations of readers and writers to come. Her time and place might have been twentieth century South Africa, but her work is timeless and universal.

### References

Contemporary Novelists. London: St. James Press, 1976.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto, 1986.

Gordimer, N. (1981). *July's People*. New York: The Viking Press.

Cloete, M.J. "A Study of Identity in Post-Apartheid South African English Literature: The Pickup by Nadine Gordimer." *Literator* 26.1 (April 2005): 48-67.

