

Rethinking Nadine Gordimer and the Prophecy of a Non-Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

Apartheid, from its inception to its demise spanning nearly a century, was a socio-political racial problem to the world. It created enemies between families, nationalities and nations. It dehumanized humanity and took lives in high number, especially in its country of origin, South Africa. One of its enemies, through the creative writing world, was Nadine Gordimer. This paper examines a few of her works through which, she, as a white liberal, spoke up for racial unity and respect while winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. The paper, done on a pedagogical position, examines the texts' thematic foci, their imports and effects on the apartheid struggle. Gordimer's works, as discovered by this work, served as a predictive and prophetic lever that apartheid would one day be gone and the colours would live together peaceably as the country is now (even as represented in the country's present national flag). This paper avers that literary works, like Gordimer's, not only serve as archival to past and present situations but that they also become prophetic to future happenings which are unconsciously predicted through the textual lenses of concerned, humane and balanced writers like Nadine Gordimer.

Keywords: Nobel Winner, South Africa, Apartheid, Nadine Gordimer, pedagogy

Introduction

Nadine Gordimer, a naturalized, white South-African and political activist was born 20th November 1923 to a Jewish father who migrated to the then Union of South Africa. She died on 13th July 2014. Despite her white colour and living in South Africa, especially when the policy of apartheid was strong, she preferred writing as a liberal in support of an equal society for all races living within the enclave: Whites, Coloureds, Blacks, Indians, etc.

According to Larson Charles, R. (1978:67), though she is classified as an African writer, her works did not deviate from the English literary tradition. She published more than twenty collections of short stories, up to about fifteen novels, a play and other non-fictional works (Wikipedia, 2022). Some of her published works are *Friday's Footprint* (1960) and *A Guest of Honour* (1972) which won the W. H. Smith Commonwealth Literary Award and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1961 and 1972 respectively. *The Conservationist* (1974) jointly won the Booker Prize in 1974. Other awards include the Grand Aigle d'Or (France) (1975), the Scottish Arts Council Neil M. Gunn Fellowship (1981), the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best Book from Africa for *The Pickup* (2002), Officier of the Legion of Honour (2007), the International Botev Prize Laureate (1996), the Nobel Prize for Literature (1991), and 15 Honorary Degrees amongst others. Her works include *The Lying Days* (her first novel: published 1953),

Face to Face (1949), *A World of Strangers* (1958), *Occasion for Loving* (1963), *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), *A Guest of Honour* (1970), *Some Monday for Sure* (1976), *Burger's Daughter* (1979), *The Pickup* (2001). *A World of Strangers* (for twelve years), *The Late Bourgeois World* (for ten years from 1976), *Burger's Daughter* (published, banned and unbanned 1979) and *July People* were banned by the apartheid South African government because, according to Dennis Brutus (Karim *et al* 2006; 187), "There is a fairly simple explanation for this: the principal characters, both black and white, at the end of the novel are on the edge of not merely an emotional but a sexual experience". Racial relationships and unity and any issue that would bring the races together, in fellowship, were fiercely rejected by the government.

As at the time she started writing, there were already organised protests against the policy of Apartheid. Two things influenced greatly her entrance into anti-apartheid activism: the 1960 arrest of Bettie du Toit, her friend, and the Sharpeville Massacre (21st March 1960). So, she neatly fitted in: not as a physical fighter but as a writer. She went ahead to join the African National Congress (ANC). And she gave her reason: "Unlike Satre, I believe a "writer's morality" is valid and the temptation to put one's writing at the service of a cause – whether it is fighting the colour-bar or 'the momentary renunciation of literature in order to educate people' etc.... is a betrayal" (Gordimer, 1990: 34). This was what she always sought in her works: a writer writing what s/he sees and not leaning to any side – the reader should be left to make the judgements.

Works and Themes Analyses

Through most of her works, the ordinary South African is seen going through the apartheid processes - pains and pangs - whether s/he is White, Black or Asian. As at the time,

protest at mistreatment of non-whites developed into an exploration of the colonial structure and inheritance of local society and subsequently into studies of identity set within the context of cultural political crises (Larson, 1978:25).

It is this protest, albeit a near-silent but very effective one, that Gordimer carried into her work.

A major example of the above is *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) where Gordimer uses the first-person narrative technique. It is a text that describes the white liberals, how the effects of their activities rub off on themselves and society. Liz is the narrator of these activities involving the life and death of her ex-husband, Max and their involvement in South African politics. Both are liberals; enlightened whites. Max puts this across at Queenie (his sister) and Allan's marriage. There, he warns against "moral sclerosis" and condemns apartheid but his opinions did not sink into the participants for according to Liz, they saw no difference between his toast and any other. Wanting a better society, Max got involved in liberal-led multi-racial gatherings though he was not politically stable as he tended to jump from one party to another. This went on until he becomes a state witness and betrays those he had once worked with. For this fault, Liz finds excuses - he might have been a revolutionary; a politician; he needed more time for maturity to set in (*The Late Bourgeois World*, 74). And these types of excuses are never tenable in a repressive society. He, therefore, dies not as a martyr but as an "immatured revolutionary-to-be" who never completed anything - his studies, political parties and activities, fight for justice, etc.

While Max is a theorizing liberal, Liz, who is also a liberal, believes in being practical and doing practical things for the revolution. But when finally asked to commit helping to take in money into South Africa by

Luke of the banned Pan-African Congress Movement, she found herself vacillating, unable to take a decisive decision.

The text is on the impending dislocation and disintegration of not only the South African society as based on the apartheid policy but also the White bourgeois society: Conservatives (old) versus Liberals (young). The text uses the Van Den Sandts family, a formerly traditional family now consisting of liberals like Max and his conservative father, Theo, to portray the conflict and tension that was entwining the society.

Like earlier posited, in the text, Gordimer does not tell us what will happen within the South African society based on her textual assumptions and facts. She leaves this for the reader to work out. She succeeds in giving us “blurred visions” for according to Emmanuel Ngara (1985: 102) “Although bourgeois society in the White-ruled republic is depicted as moribund, the author does not show us clearly what forces are to supersede it and bring about social change.”

Contemporaneous to these South African oppressive events and the death of Max, a man was taking “a giant leap for mankind” (as said by Neil Armstrong) on the moon. And this is ironically and symbolically represented in the title of the text. South Africa was still oppressive and backward when the whole world was taking a revolutionary step forward: “When Max drowned today, a man walked about in space” (*The Late Bourgeois World*, 154). Gordimer uses Liz as a mouthpiece. One can say that the opening and closing words are Liz's when we meet her with the knowledge that, “Max found drowned in car Capetown harbour” through a telegram. The greater part of the text is based on Flashback as an exploratory tool to examine the life of Max. “Chapter” one, which is in the present, shows Liz wanting to inform Bobo about the death of Max. “Chapter” two is about Liz's past while “Chapter” three moves to the present. But basically, the text has no real chapters, or divisions. The narrative takes a full Saturday - just one day and a night. With this, Gordimer brought to the fore the sorrow of the death of Max through Liz's contemplation. Art, therefore, becomes related to reality.

The language of narration is smooth to a near faultless level: with a lyrical touch. A seeming limitation is the abstractness or the un-decorativeness and tautness of the language employed. This might be due to Liz's intellectual disposition: the language has no emotional appeal, is dry, and is intellectual to the extent that even sexual descriptions sound like scientific analyses. And in the use of “urine”, “shit”, etc., Gordimer depicts a gradual societal movement from the conservative white bourgeois class. Through this, she injects into the reader an intense feeling of disgust and resentment especially for the white bourgeois class:

She has a reckless drinker's face that diabetics sometimes have and looks as if she had once been good looking like a finished whore ... The monster with the enormous belly was sitting on a chair with her legs splayed out, like a dead frog swollen on a pond.

To sum up, Dennis Brutus in *Poetry and Protest: A Dennis Brutus Reader* (2006:187) opines that the text is “a criticism and a condemnation of white society in South Africa today: of its ruthlessness, of the lack of communication not only between black and white but also between white and black”.

Another work of Nadine Gordimer is *Some Monday For Sure* (1976). This is a collection of short stories Bruce King (1980) posits portray the reality of everyday life in South Africa. Through these stories, Gordimer enlightens and informs through the vividness with which she tells the stories in detail. According to her (Gurnah, 1993: 108): “My approach in these stories, as in very many others is that of

irony. In fact, I would say that in general, in my stories, my approach as a short story writer is the ironical one” and this “represents the writer's unconscious selection of the approach best suited to his material”.

The text consists of thirteen short stories illustrating the socio-political and economic lives of South Africans before the eradication of Apartheid. Within these themes are different and varied subject matters affecting the whole of the South African societal strata. The first story, “Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?” graphically portrays a society that lacks verbal communication and, therefore, resorts to violence as a means of getting messages across. In the story, the two sides lose as they neither go unscathed physically nor emotionally. In the end, the questions are, “Why did I fight ... What did I fight for? Why didn't I give him the money and let him go? His red eyes and the smell and those cracks in his feet, fissures, erosion. She shuddered.” (*Some Monday For Sure*, 5).

Gordimer treats another subject matter in “Ah, Woe Is Me” and “Six Feet of the Country”: that of “the shameful impotence of paternalism”. Adults, because they are blacks and servants, are referred to as “boys” or “girls”: depicting unserious, uncouth, uncivilized and inferior black adulthood. This is the type of master-servant relationship that operated in the South Africa of then. And because of this, the blacks were not respected and human dignity was not accorded them like in the burying of loved ones as portrayed in “Six Feet of the Country”: “At last, it became clear that we would never get Petrus's brother back, because nobody really knew where he was ... He had no identity in this world anyway.” (*Some Monday For Sure*, 24-25).

The stories, “Which New Era Would That Be?”, “The Smell of Death and Flowers” and “Something for the Time Being”, were written according to Gordimer (Uledi-Kamanga, 2002:27) “during the heyday of the multi-racial dream that possessed some blacks and whites”. These are stories that show the intricacies involved in liberal movements in South Africa. These movements gave rise to inter-racial groups and personal relationships through which Whites and Blacks co-operated culminating in a text like *The Last Bourgeois World*. Among the collection of stories, “Which New Era World That Be?” is one of the first that looks at events from the Blacks' point of view. And the contact between the colours brings about comments like:

She would not let herself formulate the words in her brain: I am dancing with a black man. But she allowed herself to question with the careful detachment of scientific inquiry, quietly inside herself: “Do I feel anything? What do I feel? (*Some Monday For Sure*, 45).

Linked to the above is the story of “The Bridegroom” which shows the intra- and inter-dependence of the races on each other but this dependence is more on the side of the Whites. They can do nothing much without the assistance of the Blacks but still, they fear, despise and oppress the blacks. Without the “boys”, the young bridegroom can do no road-building but because of his new wife, he proposes that, “The boys must keep out of the way” but discovers that “you couldn't hide them under a thorn bush” and so he lamely decides that “they must just understand that they mustn't hang around”. This is the same subject matter pursued in “The African Magician” though the setting is an independent country in Africa. The story, “Not for Publication”, according to Gordimer (Uledi-Kamanga, 2002: 30),

deals with the imposition of an image by white upon black – in this case, the irony lies in the fact that it is not an oppressor's image that the well-meaning white priest and white liberal fighter for the black cause press upon the young black genius, but it proves

destructive, nevertheless.

And it is this that makes the future Prime Minister run amock, at least for a period and to retreat into what he knows best: “But they knew nothing about the boy, nothing at all. The younger woman remarked, “Maybe he's with those boys who sleep in the old empty cars there in town - you know? - there by the beer hall?” (*Some Monday For Sure*, 99) after he had had western education for years and was preparing to take his matriculation exam. Symbolically, the boy, Praise, had shielded away from western imposed ideas - “Father Audry put out his fine hand, in question or compassion. But the boy leapt up, dodging a blow. “Sir-no. Sir-no”.

In “A Chip of Glass Ruby”, Gordimer tells us that the fight against Apartheid was not only fought by the Blacks helped by liberal Whites but also by Indians – poor Indians like Mrs Bamjee with a husband and nine children. And for her, it was hope, freedom and a better future that she fights for as “she was not like the others: it was there, like the fact of the belly that lay between him and her daughter” (*Some Monday For Sure*, 120).

“Some Monday for Sure” represents for Gordimer (in her Introduction to the story) that “perfectly ordinary day, for sure, black South Africans will free themselves and rule themselves”. This is a prophecy that came true even in her lifetime. We are given the ironies involved in the lives of political refugees and the certainty that freedom will surely be achieved and South Africans will surely one day cry, “Uhuru”. The men who operate the hold-up are cast “in the nationalist mould as their actions and utterances in the story bear out” (Iheakaran 1989: 224). The years they spent in Ethiopia and Algeria are years of exile, characteristic of anti-apartheid South African writers and revolutionaries.

Between “Open House” and “Africa Emergent”, the effects and results of the black and white movements of the 1960s (when liberalism became old-fashioned) are treated. The hope and aspirations of this movement had been betrayed and Gordimer shows this in the two stories. They are stories full of ironies about white and black South Africans in respect of colour clash.

This text is filled with lots of symbolism and ironies as Gordimer believes in closed preaching. And she approaches her subject matters and characters through the avenue of irony. The language of the text, like most of Gordimer's works, is simple, straightforward to comprehend. According to Claude Wauthier (1978), “...Nadine ...dwelt sympathetically on the fate of the oppressed negro”.

A cursory look at some of her other works portrays the examination of apartheid from different angles and its effects on the South African world vis-à-vis humans and their relationships based on skin colour. In all, her take is that Apartheid and human separation, based on culture, was not needed. Her works portend that an end to apartheid, like it finally happened, would come to reality.

In *Occasion for Loving* (1963), Boaz Davis, (an ethnomusicologist) and Ann Davis (both whites) are married. This did not stop Ann Davis (white) from falling in love with Gideon Shibalo (a black artist). Gordimer shows to the reader what the South African government thinks of situations of this sort: negative and criminal.

July People (1981) examines the apartheid world through the eyes of a white couple (Maureen and Bamford Smales) who are hounded by their former black servant. There is a revolution by the blacks and they are out for their former masters. The interplay here focuses on the trauma placed on humans in the society as groups and individuals, relationships across human colours and the destructive effects that can come out of these, if not well managed.

There is *The Pickup* (2002) which puts on the scale the experience of Julie Summers (a white) and Abdu (an illegal immigrant Arab) in South Africa. On his failure to get a visa, both return to Abdu's country, and Julie becomes the immigrant. The text examines the issues of migration, immigration, religion, love, (de)personalization, alienation, and displacement across two worlds that are very opposite.

Conclusion

According to Ngara (1985), Gordimer, through her works, can be classified as a social democrat. And prevalent in her works are aspects of critical realism - reproducing typical characters in typical situations and events. The Nobel Prize for Literature also recognizes that Nadine Gordimer "through her magnificent epic writing has -in the words of Alfred Nobel -been of very great benefit to humanity" (Nobelprize, 7 October 2010).

Her major limitations, according to Brutus (Karim, 2006: 187), are; one, "in her books, even the emotional relationships are forced, are conjured up, are synthetic" and two, she "can observe with a detachment with the coldness of a machine". She becomes cold and her characters reflect this. To an extent, for example, Liz, in *The Late Bourgeois World* depicts this. This coldness is also reflected in her use of language which tends to become emotionally flat and taut.

Notwithstanding these, Gordimer's works contributed a lot to the struggle against Apartheid. They show what South Africans went through individually and collectively. Accordingly, Nadine Gordimer, regarded as a South African literary nationalist, has contributed "a positive impact... created about the human predicament in South Africa. Perhaps in no other literature than South Africa can literature be aptly noted as the "the history of human consciousness itself... an embodiment and therefore a guarantee, of human resilience and creativity" (Dyson and Lovelock, 1976:12)

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