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# Gordimer a novelist of Colonialism and Racism

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## 1. Introduction

Gordimer's novels offer an insight into the most crucial period of South Africa's history. Her writing career ran parallel to the era of apartheid in South Africa. Gordimer is an interesting writer to study as she is a part of the very system that she critiques. As a white South African she is aware that she belongs to the group that holds power in South Africa. She resolves this tension in her novels, which severely criticise the racist state and prophesy its end. Gordimer believes that the state's attempts to segregate the people on the basis of race have to be subverted. I study how Gordimer's novels offer resistance to the aparthied state and subvert it. In this thesis I attempt to study how subjectivity, in a country like South Africa, is inflected by race, gender and class.

## 2. Review of literature

Nadine Gordimer's first novel The Lying Days deals with traces the female protagonist's search for identity and her inevitable political awakening Helen Shaw, the narrator of the novel, is the daughter of the mine secretary. Her life in Atherton, a small mining town, is uneventful. Her sexual awakening in a seaside town with Ludi, a family friend, breaks the shackles of the stifling life that Atherton offers. Ludi takes her out of the repressive topos of the family. She goes to Johannesburg to join college and makes friends with Aaron Joel, a Jew and Mary Seswayo, a black girl. By deciding to leave her home at Atherton, she rejects the codes of the society in which she had grown up. Her life at the University widens her political and social awareness. However it does not bring about a political awakening as she is still riddled with the racist stereotypes that were thrust on her. She is exposed to a totally different life in Johannesburg in the company of a few liberal friends. Paul, one of these friends, becomes her lover. Her involvement with Paul reveals to her the areas that she was ignorant of earlier. She sees the life that the blacks lead in their locations beyond the comfortable and rich townships of the whites.

This exposure that she gets to the lives of the blacks is similar to her first venture into the black location as a little girl. She has come a full circle, but there is no growth or a , t ---------- ---------- ----------" ' process of Bildung. The novel explores the factors that deny progression and growth in Helen's life.

## 3. Development of Thought

Helen's childhood is constructed by the white middle-class English society of the mining town which leads a cocooned existence. The natives are perceived through the filters of race by the whites. Atherton observes its hierarchy of power with the English at the top, followed by the Afrikaners, later the Jews and finally the blacks. So sterile are the lives of the whites that no sparks of dissent or discontent can be detected in what seems ironically an utopian life of parties, tennis matches and gossips.

Helen grows in such a codified environment. She grows with the stereotypes of the natives which are handed down to her by the adults. Her sensibility and consciousness are defined by the racist white society. Her literary sensibility is formed by the alien world of Europe which by its persistence has become more familiar than what is familiarly known and available to her. As she observes, "I have never read a book in which I myself was recognizable; in which there was a 'girl' like Anna who did the housework and the cooking and called the mother and father Missus and Baas ..(20). The books she reads and the culture she is initiated into do not give her a sense of identity as she feels alienated from them.

Helen's first foray into the native location is significant. The objects in the location bombard into her senses. She also realises that she with her " ... kilt and ... hand -knitted socks and... hair tied with neat ribbon" has become an object herself (24). Her coming into an eye to eye contact with a chameleon across the glass of a concession store upsets the subject - object equation. This happens many times in her life making her question the dichotomy on which the racist society is constructed. She attempts to free herself from the thought that she might have contracted an invisible and fearful infection at the location. At the same time "a sudden press of knowledge" descends on her when she sees a black boy urinating(24). The girl can relate with the Other at the most obvious level of the body. The social structuring of the girl's consciousness is thus undermined.

Joel Aaron, Helen's lifelong friend and Mary Seswayo, an African student in her class, question the growth that she claims to have attained by her rejection of the oppressive town and her constricting family. They are the "Other" who foreground the othering process which exists at a level not perceptible to her. Mary is the mirror image, Helen's alter ego. When they see each other in the cloak room, which by itself is a significant spatial context in South Africa where blacks are generally not allowed in a "whites only" cloak room, both have the same expression on their faces. This intimidates Helen the way she was intimidated on seeing the chameleon staring at her out of the window of a concession store. The Other is not a frozen object but actually tries to other the very subject in a strange reversal which both registers and offsets the division between the races.

Nadine Gordimer's second novel A World of Strangers examines whether liberal commitment and multi-racialism can counter the laws of the apartheid state. Stephen Clingman calls it the "frontier text" (67), and the novel can be read as an exploration of the middle space existing between the polarities constructed by racism.

In this novel Nadine Gordimer does not prescribe closures or simplifications. A World of Strangers can also be read as a novel of learning tracing the protagonist's, who is also the narrator, growth through his travel to South Africa from England. Toby Hood comes to South Africa to manage his uncle's publishing firm. To his liberal mother and uncle, South Africa is the most happening place which demands obvious choices. So Toby's very first impression on seeing the natives is: "I hate the faces of peasants" (7). He assumes an identity antithetical to what he fears South Africa might thrust upon him. He visualises himself as Sindbad the sailor on one of his glorious adventures. For him Africa is an exotic land fixed in time. His egocentric exclusion of everything that might have the traces of ideology is evident: "I want to take care of my own relationships with men and women who come into my life, and let the abstractions of race and politics go hang. I want to live! And to hell with you all!" (34). He straddles with ease the polarised world of the rich whites and the poor blacks, one with all its splendour and glitter, and the other with itspoverty. Toby is a stranger in both the worlds as he flits through them, records them objectively and keeps himself aloof from the historical situation. Toby clarifies at the very beginning that he does not want to be a "voyeur of the world's ills and social perversions" (33). As an European in Africa he drifts between the two axiomatic worlds and observes with detachment and irony the petty lives of the white South Africans, and the minute details of the life at the location. By being objective and detached he becomes precisely what he had not wanted to become - - a voyeur.

Stephen Clingman observes that Toby "indulges in a kind of amoral voyeurism, merely observing the world in which he finds himself' (54). He remains a voyeur until social engagement and commitment make him a partaker in the misery and struggle around him.

The colonial tendency that can be read in Toby's argument can also be found in his objectification of women. For Toby, women are objects of desire. Possession is registered through power. He sees an Indian woman as an object of desire. He is reminded of a photograph of an image of Vrisaka, the Tree Goddess he had cut - - a tenth century sculpture with "round stone breasts and little round waist" (182). This parallel between the woman and a sculpture, reducing the Indian woman to the memory of an exotic object is part of the othering process. He gains power over the woman/Other through knowledge. Anna Louw is the object of his fear. He overcomes this fear by making love to her even though he never desires her. Dominic Head reads this sexual encounter thus: "The fear of the 'other' produces the desire to control and oppress" (51). Cecil, his white lover is also objectified. He does not share a deep or meaningful relationship with Cecil Rowe. She is one of those rich privileged whites leading a superficial life. She remains just an object of his desire. He says, "I had, I supposed an Eastern equation of women with pleasure; I fiercely resisted any impingement on this preserve" (141). He sees in the mirror not his own reflection, but an image of Cecil, "the face of another species" (77). The reflection that he sees in the mirror is the Other. Dominic Head observes that it is " ... the way in which the forces of colonial imperialism view the potential of exotic 'other' places and populations" (51). His othering of women problematises the theme of growth and the apolitical position that he assumes. Subtle traces of colonial mindset are found in Toby. This also problematises Toby's role as a stranger or an outsider in South Africa. Toby observes that there are two types of people in South Africa - - the people with public life whose life is bound to the public and "collective fate" (115), and the people who want private life. Toby identifies himself and Steven as those who want to guard their private lives. However, Steven is expected by his people to lead his life in a certain way: "It isn't enough that a chap like Steven has all the bother of being a black man in this country, on top of it he's expected to give up to political action whatever small part of his life he can call his own" (117). Toby's passionate statement for a private life has to be contrasted with what Sam says of a black man's responsibility towards his community and his people. He says, "No matter how much you manage to do for yourself, it's not enough ... You can't ever get out of debt while there's one member of the family who has to pay a fine or get sick and go to hospital" (243,244). The novel focuses on Toby's transformation as he gives up the world view of Steven to take to Sam's world view. Toby ceases to be aloof like Steven. He becomes politically aware like Sam.

Occasion for Loving foregrounds how racial difference constructs and structures even the most private emotions and thoughts of the individual. The novi examines the mechanics of sexual politics in an interracial affair. It also records the practical problems that individuals involved in cross-racial relationship face. Gideon, a black character in the novel, cannot take his white lover to a restaurant of his choice.

He has to use the servant's staircase in a white-occupied apartment to meet his white lover. Such mundane matters cast a shadow on the personal romantic dimension of the affair, making every attempt a daring statement against the system. The novel demystifies interracial sexual relationship from the realm of sin or immorality. The novel also examines the different levels at which race works, right from the everyday matters to the social and the political, to the psychological level, where the suppressed j y fear of the Other casts its shadow.

Occasion for Loving begins with Jessie's childhood memories. She deliberately withdraws from the external world by getting absorbed in her personal history. She soon realises that the understanding of the personal cannot take place in isolation. It is linked with her s/' relation with people. The inquiry into the personal leads her to the social and the political as well. In South Africa all of them are intricately linked.

Jessie is married to Tom Stilwell, an academician. Her first husband had been killed in the war. She has a son from her first marriage and three children from her second marriage. David Boaz and his young English wife Ann come to live with the Stilwells. David Boaz, who is doing his research on primitive musical instruments of the Africans, has come to South Africa after a gap of ten years. Ann, the young English girl, is eager to "find new things," and she takes to "the people I don't know " as "experience outside" (39). Her marriage to David Boaz, a Jew, could have resulted out of the same fascination for the "experience outside." Ann has an affair with Gideon , a black artist. The private life of Jessie Stilwell is invaded by this interracial affair. Tom, David and Jessie come to realise that the liaison between Ann and Gideon does not exist in a vacuum. Their reaction to the affair is controlled by thej^ way the state has conditioned their consciousness.

 

## 4. Conclusion

The novel hinges on the cross-racial affair between Gideon and Ann. The characters in the novel treat the subject of interracial relationship as a normal affair. They try to highlight the normalcy of the affair as though it is just another affair between a vivacious white woman and her lover. Jessie sees them together in a restaurant and realises that they are both having an affair. She discusses them with Tom and sounds as though she is indulging in a gossip. Ann too discloses to her husband her affair with Gideon in a natural tone.

The affair between Gideon and Ann is circumscribed by the laws of the state. That it is not a normal affair but a relationshipj between a white woman and a black man becomes evident. Ann and Gideon are reminded, at every moment of their togetherness, of the way the state comes between them.

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