

Chapter One

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South African literature in English offers a distinct set of experience because of the distinct nature of the South African situation. The white minority has tried to perpetuate its position of supremacy over the black majority in the country through the invention of the socio-political myth of apartheid. South Africa's political history has been the history of mutual distrust between the whites and the blacks due to white oppression and repression. As Roland Smith points out, 'White English-speaking writers have reacted repeatedly to the consistent undertone of violence in their environment, and most black English - speaking writers deal openly with the brutality of their existence in white-ruled world.'¹ Athol Fugard, another white liberal writer from South Africa, confesses about 'The experience of becoming outcasts' in one's own country and states further that it 'is almost impossible to imagine a situation on this earth where it is harder to survive than here and now in South Africa.'²

Nadine Gordimer, the white woman novelist, occupies a problematic position in South Africa. In spite of her colonial inheritance of power and privilege as a member of the white community, her commitment to the black cause and her opposition to the system of white oppression and exploitation isolates her from her own community. Being born a white, the black society sees her as the symbol of white oppressors, and of the perpetrators of repressive violence. Writing, hence, offers the exclusive means for her creative imagination to come to terms with the political and the existential tensions of her situation. Her primary concern as a radical white liberal has been to explore the possibility of a creative role for the whites in building a new future for integrated South Africa, founded on the mutual trust between the blacks and the whites. Her fiction is a creative interstice between her commitment to the sense of belonging to her country, and her revolt against the white heredity of colonialism.

Gordimer's fictional explorations of the human relationships centre on the private drama encountered by an individual in the form of racial and political conflict. Her novels are seldom directly political because she is primarily interested in the human condition as evident in personal relationships. 'Because

racial politics in South Africa affect every individual and every personal relationship, her major preoccupation has inevitably drawn her to the larger implications, and these, she has faced honestly, clinically, logically, satirically but above all compassionately.³

The stages of personal life of an individual character occupy a vital position in Nadine Gordimer's fiction because of her primary concern with 'the flesh and blood of individual behaviour.'⁴ Childhood, then, becomes one of the vital phases in the evolution of the individual for the novelist. In Nadine Gordimer's fiction, child becomes, especially, a crucial metaphor for the suffering humanity as well as for its hope of future. Hence, it is proposed to study the portrayal of childhood in the fiction of Nadine Gordimer, with special reference to her three works -

- 1) A Sport of Nature (1987)
- 2) My Son's Story (1990)
- 3) Jump and Other Stories (1991).

The child was the vital medium through which the nineteenth century British creative imagination interpreted man's relationship with the environment and even with God both in

fiction and in poetry. K. Chellappan shows how even in Commonwealth short stories, 'the child archetype ... is one of the most recurrent themes.'⁵ Commonwealth literature in general, and African literature in particular, have located the symbolic meaning - potential of child and childhood. Especially children's fiction utilizes child figures as an entry into the complex process of child's growth in response to the environment. The child perspective facilitates criticism of the adult world with its cultural traditions and socio-economic framework. Ezenwa Ohaeto, for instance, carries attention to Flora Nwapa's children's fiction which reflects 'a consciousness for the creative use of ... concept of childhood especially in terms of childhood behaviour and the associated culture in which the child develops.'⁶ Nadine Gordimer has not written children's fiction as such. Yet she has exploited the multi-dimensional meaning - potential of 'child' and 'childhood' throughout her fiction in her struggle to explore the repressive effects of apartheid on personal relationships between the blacks and the whites.

The political context of the child image in the colonised African continent may enlighten the significance of child as the coloniser's strategy against the colonised. The ideology of England

as 'the mother country' was deliberately implanted by the British masters to glorify the relationships between the colonier and the colonised, as that of mother and child. For instance, Ndabaningi Sithole, a protestant missionary, accused Dr. Albert Schweitzer for deliberately reducing the adult African, 'to a child so that he can justify the superimposition of European authority on the African.'⁷ However, children themselves have played a crucial role in the antiapartheid struggle for liberation in South Africa. In 1976-77, a protest by school children in the black township of Soveto near Johannesburg had led to the outburst of racial violence throughout the country. Almost all African writers have concretised the dream of freedom in the image of a child as the citizen of the liberated country. For instance, Du Bois, black American poet, whose forefathers are from Africa. Writes a poem. The ending lines are - 'I felt the blazing glory of the sun; I heard the song of the children crying, 'Free', I saw the face of freedom ... and I died.'⁸

The crystalization of childhood in the fiction of Nadine Gordimer is, in a sense, the essentialization of her own personal experience of childhood. As a little girl living in the small mining town under the repressive authority of her mother, she had a lonely childhood. Obsessed with loneliness, she turned to writing at the

age of nine or ten as a release. She tell, 'I was alone. My poem or story came out of myself. I did not know how. It was directed to no one, was read by no one.'⁹ The mother-daughter relationship has obsessed Gordimer's psyche so that her writing becomes an exclusive means to liberate herself from the mother's repressive influence. It is projected through her primary concern with an individual's growth from childhood to maturity. As early as 1953, Nathan Rothman had noted that in Gordimer's works there was 'far too much of the coming-of-age of an adolescent'¹⁰ Robert F. Haugh registers 'Stores' as the place chosen for a number of short stories by Gordimer. He notes how it becomes, 'a strange and wonderful place to a child ... her innocence is lost.'¹¹

The strategic use of childhood to clarify as well as essentialise the magnitude of apartheid experience is particularly evident in the three works of Nadine Gordimer - A Sport of Nature (1987), My Son's Story (1990), Jump and Other Stories (1991). The thematic nature of approach to the study of childhood in these works is non-chronological. The child protagonist is utilized mostly as a metaphor for the suffering humanity in the childhood stories from Jump and Other Stories. Childhood is allowed a more creative and sustained role in the process of black boy's growth to maturity

in My Son's Story. The framework, within which it is active, in both personal as well as dangerously political. Childhood appears to fulfil a still more dynamic role in the process of evolution of a white orphan girl in A Sport of Nature. The novel traces the development of a problem girl child into an active revolutionary dedicated to the black cause of liberation, in the context of the African continent.

Gordimer's conceptualisation of childhood is psychological as well as sociological. In her fiction, childhood emerges as a stage in the individual's growth flexibly extending up to, and often including, adolescence. Of course, even sociologically, the points of transition from one category of age differentiation to another, such as childhood, youth, middle-age and old-age tend to change over time, and vary from one sphere of social life to another. In earlier societies, the childhood was clearly distinguished from youth as it marked 'the end of an individual's phase of dependency within the family. -- However in modern industrial societies childhood is continuation of the period of dependency corresponding to the period of school education and even beyond although child emerges as youth.¹²

In Gordimer's fiction childhood extends beyond infancy to include the phases from the unborn child in the womb

and even the phase of adolescence. In 'Jump', the unfortunate white youth is projected as a child in his qualities of trustfulness and idealism. Similarly, Will, the black hero of My Son's Story, remains a child in his attitude to the father in spite of adolescence. In A Sport of Nature, the earliest period of seventeen years, spent by Hillela with her mother and with her two aunts, is treated as the period of the childhood in the narrative.

The Chapter division is as follows -

The second chapter offers a brief survey of apartheid in South Africa. It is divided in the history of five decades. A brief sketch of the life and works of Nadine Gordimer follows it.

The third chapter studies Gordimer's collection of short stories, Jump and Other Stories (1991). The childhood stories in the collection are divided in two groups. The first group includes the stories which treat child of a major character. The second group includes the stories in which childhood becomes a vital term of reference in the delineation of characters.

The fourth chapter analyses the growth of the black boy from childhood to adolescence, activated by his unexpected exposure to the extra-marital affair of his political activist father

with a white woman activist. The process of reorganization of son's relationship with the father involves simultaneously the re-adjustment of his relation with the activist mother.

The fifth chapter explores the process of evolution of a white orphan girl as found in A Sport of Nature. The novel comes as an ambitious attempt on the part of Nadine Gordimer to concretise her idealistic vision of liberated South Africa as a rainbow society.

The last chapter summarizes the conclusions which emerge from the critical explorations of the three works of Gordimer, highlighting the thematic and the strategic significance of childhood in them.

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