

## **Chapter Two**

### **THE SOUTH AFRICAN BACKGROUND AND NADINE GORDIMER**

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The detailed study of the portrayal of childhood in the fiction of Nadine Gordimer requires clarification of the political background of apartheid, and of the specific circumstances that have affected childhood in the black and white communities in South Africa. A sketch of Nadine Gordimer's life and works will help to gain a broad perspective for understanding the portrayal of childhood in his fiction.

### I Apartheid in South Africa

Under the policy of separate or multinational development, the South African Government recognised the separate 'black' nations defined in ethnolinguistic terms. In 1948 Daniel E. Malan's National Party was elected to office and introduced the policy of apartheid 'separate government' which was designed to ensure white supremacy.

*needs to be rewritten in Africa*

Apartheid supports racism. It results into discrimination. Racial discrimination is an action carried out by

members of dominant groups or their representatives which have a differential and harmful impact on members of subordinate groups.

Dinesh D'Souza<sup>1</sup> defines racism as a phenomenon with the following main features - A belief in biologically distinguishable groups or races; the ranking of these races in terms of superiority and inferiority, holding these rankings to be intrinsic or innate; and using these rankings as a basis for discrimination, segregation or denial of rights to others.

The decadewise brief survey of the political history of apartheid in South Africa, may be given as follows -

a) 1950s :

African opposition to apartheid intensified in the 1950s, spearheaded by the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC). It resulted into interracial co-operation in fighting against white supremacy. Population Registration Act forms policy of segregation i.e. removal of blacks from white area and to send them to their homeland, decided by white supremacy. Freedom charter is formed in 1956. Accra Conference projected '1963' as the deadline for liberating Africa. Extension of University

Education Act is implemented in 1959 which introduced segregational policy in the field of higher education.

**b) 1960s :**

ANC and PAC organizations are banned in 1960 following the Sharpeville massacre near Vereeniging. In 1961, the Union of South Africa withdraws from the Commonwealth of Nations due to opposition within that body to apartheid policies, and the Republic of South Africa is declared. In the same year, Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress, is established. The Publications and Entertainment Act of 1963 introduced 'censorship' with writers as political targets. By the mid - 60s, African Resistance Movement comes into focus.

**c) 1970s :**

NUSA i.e. The National Union of South African Students is active against policies of apartheid. The decade is noteworthy for the rise of Black Consciousness Movement which is handled by two organizations - 1) South African Students' Organization (SASO), 2) Black Peoples' Contention (BPC). It has been decided that black liberation could be achieved only through blacks. Publications and Entertainment Act of 1963 is replaced by

Publications Act in 1974. In 1976, riots break out in Soweto and other black townships started by school children, and spread throughout the country. It is followed by the search of new synthesis of culture unfragmented by apartheid. In 1978, the South African government begins major political and social reforms. In 1979, black labour unions are legalized.

**d) 1980s :**

Black trade union movement had leading position in antiapartheid struggle. It is followed by first mass movement, 'United Democratic Front.' The movement is almost successful as apartheid policy is withdrawn by law. In 1985, government repeals the ban on multiracial political parties. The laws which control the movement of blacks are scrapped in 1986. In 1987, the government proposes some modifications to the Group Areas Act. In the September 1989 parliamentary elections, the National Party loses seats to both the right and the left, but an overall majority goes to candidates advocating cautious reform.

**e) 1990s :**

The thirty-year ban on the ANC is lifted on February second and ANC leader Nelson Mandela, the most popular leader

among blacks, is released on February 11. F. W. Klerk pledges to end apartheid and the state of emergency is lifted in all provinces except Natal. South Africa gets freedom in 1994 with Nelson Mandela as its first President. On May 8, 1996, the South African Parliament votes to adopt a new constitution, among the most progressive in the world, thus, finally bringing apartheid to a formal close.

Though South Africa is free of apartheid madness, both whites and blacks have to forget their hatred of each other and work in the new atmosphere of freedom, not formally race-based. If, under majority rule, the South Africans achieve that society, the mind of South Africa will no longer distinguish between those who conquered, and those who were repressed, but will create a national ethos, based on the Zulu ideal, 'people are people through other people.'

## II) Childhood in the South African Context

The policy of apartheid has resulted in unique cultural orientations, histories, and socioeconomic circumstances for black and white families in South Africa. As Goldberg points out, 'whites are seen in South Africa, as in the United States, as the guarantors of stability and political rationality, of peacefulness and law and order;

blacks represent just the opposite.<sup>2</sup> The black and white child socialization outcomes are tied to family social and economic characteristics by a myriad intervening processes across, 'The general realm of values ---, child-rearing practices and parent-child interpersonal relations.'<sup>3</sup> For instance, from childhood white children are reared on the concept of their superiority to the blacks because of the colour of their skin. On the other hand, black children breathe in the environment of 'Residential segregation, racially patterned educational differences in in-put and out-put, and discriminatory joblessness with its disturbing discriminatory effects of violence and crime.'<sup>4</sup>

Children at school and college do not have much chance to compare their lot with that of white people. Living in reserve and going to mission school or college, far away from the big white cities, their only real contact with white people is with the school principal and the missionary, and so if they suffer in any way from discriminatory treatment by white men, they tend to confuse their resentment of the schoolboys towards those in authority who abuse them.

The education given to black children is government controlled. Through its policy of Bantu Education, a lower quality education but large in volume is given, and is geared to producing poorly qualified black people. The whole system of education is organised in such a way that an African child can only be exposed to his or her mother tongue at the lowest level. The African child is encouraged, sometimes in the name of language progress, to speak fanakolo language that is a crossbreed language blending English and Afrikaans and one or more African tongues. Thus begins the process of alienation from the mother tongue combined with the idea of the non functionality of these languages in places of employment. The weeding out of African students at the early level guarantees cheap unqualified labour, people only semiliterate in the mother tongue.

Most black children are forced to flee their homes and some of them stay in exile for more than three decades. Those children do not get proper primary education, food and shelter. In poor black families extra-marital relationship of parents results in the neglect of children. In rural areas, female child does not get proper education. Parents treat girls as earning hands for their poor



families. Hence, they are reluctant to educate them. The educated girls leave their families after marriage.

In spite of change in government's attitude to apartheid, the white continue to stay in comfort and luxury. However, only a few black people stay in the suburbs of the whites. The majority of black people stay in black locations without essential facilities. Some places are over-populated because of lack of land. The black children suffer from the lack of healthy atmosphere.

In modern civilization of South Africa, child is largely removed from the hands of the mother and placed in those of specialised instructor. Among the wealthier classes, scarcely is the infant born when it passes into the hands of the trained nurse and from hers on into the hands of the qualified teacher, till at nine or ten the son, in certain countries, often leaves home forever for the public school, to pass on to college and university; while the daughter, in the hands of trained instructors and dependents owes in the majority of cases, her education or formation to maternal toil. While even among our poorer classes, the infant school, the board-school, and later on the necessity of manual training, take the son

and often the daughter, as completely, and always increasingly as civilisation advances, from the maternal control.

The situation in South Africa is under the process of change. African National Congress government appears to be anxious to abolish apartheid rooted within the black and white South African psyche.

*Don't you think this is rather sketchy!*

### III) **Nadine Gordimer**

Nadine Gordimer (b. 1923), the South African woman novelist occupies a significant place in African literature. As a white writer, she prefers 'the solitude of the marginalized'<sup>5</sup> by being one of the group of the whites who are opposed to the system of white oppression and exploitation. She decodes her inner conviction as an artist in her statement - "Whether a writer is black or white, in South Africa the essential gesture by which he enters the brotherhood of man - which is the only definition of society that has any permanent validity - is a revolutionary gesture."<sup>6</sup> In her fiction, she is engaged with the search for identity in social and political terms through exploration of the personal and the public in the framework of racial conflict.

She is born in a small mining town of Springs, near Johannesburg, daughter of Isidor Gordimer, a Russian Jew and a jeweler, and Nan (Myers) Gordimer, an English Jew. She takes her early education in local schools and as a day - student in convent school. In 1945, she passes matriculation at the university of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. In 1949, she got married to Gavron, and in 1954, to Reinhold Cassier, a business executive. She and her husband live in Johannesburg with their son, her husband's daughter by an earlier marriage, and her own daughter by a previous marriage.

Gordimer's literary career begins in 1939. Her first story is published in 1939, in Forum, a Johannesburg weekly, named 'Come Again Tomorrow.' Her first collection of short stories is published in 1949, by Silver Leaf Books, Johannesburg. In 1950, 'The Hour and the Years' her first story is published in an American magazine. Yale Review, The New Yorker, publishes her story first time in 1951 - "A Watcher of the Dead."

Gordimer's first novel is published in 1953, The Lying Days. Since then, she publishes series of novels and attracts critics' attention. She has got several awards. Some of them are -

*This is unacceptable*

- 1) W.H. Smith and Son, annual literacy award of 1000 pounds in 1961 for short story collection Friday's Footprint.
- 2) Her novel The Late Bourgeois World published in 1966, receives Hopwood Awards Lectures, University of Michigan, in April 1970.
- 3) She receives James Tait Black Memorial Prize for novel, A Guest of Honour in 1973.
- 4) She has got Thomas Pringle Award in 1972.
- 5) The Conservationist is joint winner of the 1974 Booker Prize.
- 6) In 1980, she receives CNA prize, top literary award of South Africa.
- 7) She wins Nobel Prize in 1991 for literature.

As a speaker at conferences, reviewer, and visiting lecturer at various universities, including Princeton and Harvard, she has made an outstanding contribution to literary understanding. Although a frequent visitor abroad, she has chosen to live and work in South Africa, despite her hatred of apartheid. Her fiction has chronicled, very substantially, the damaging effects of oppressive racial laws upon the human potential of white South Africans, while making very clear the brutal burdens that black people bear.

Nadine Gordmier's first novel, The Lying Days (1953), gives a picture of the kind of society and landscape which formed

her early years. It is both social and psychological document and a literary tract and a challenge to the dominance of European literary conventions.

Gordimer's second novel, A World of Strangers (1958), is largely analytical. The central character, working temporarily in South Africa, returns to England, when he finds it impossible to keep a foot in both black and white South Africa and remain uninvolved.

Gordimer's third novel, Occasion for Loving (1963), deals with a white liberal Jessie Stilwell, whose personal inclinations are all for withdrawal into herself, of escape even from the demands of her eldest child's love.

In the Late Bourgeois World (1967), the last fuss of superfluous detail disappears, the most economic of the novels. In the form of Liz Van der Sand's interior monologue the day she learns of her former husband Max's suicide, she reviews their life together and their attempts to make common cause with African political movements.

A Guest of Honour (1971), the only novel so far that she has not set in South Africa, is the fulcrum of her writing career. It

deals with speculative raid into the area of possible options for white South African when black majority rule comes about.

The Conservationist (1974), explores the inner life of an outwardly healthy, confident, successful white capitalist, able to use other people or loot for his reflection in them but incapable of any reciprocal relationship.

Burger's Daughter (1979), focuses on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Rosa Burger is the daughter of courageous noble-minded Marxist of Africaner origin. Both die in South African prisons.

July's People (1981), makes a further development in Gordimer's determination to press harder upon her readers' imaginations. It shows enormous uncertainties that follow upon some future civil upheaval. 'A decent' white liberal couple and their black servant July gradually find not only that all the comfortable assumptions on which their former lives and relationships had been based were in fact falsified by the apartheid political, social and economic system.

A Sport of Nature (1987), offers an analysis of different ways of shedding the horrors of growing up to resemble one's

mother. The heroine Hillela, an opportunist, whose roles depend on her lovers, is a departure from the stock who brought her up in white Johannesburg.

My Son's Story (1990), is a psychoanalytical novel which explores anti-apartheid struggle, the changing attitudes towards co-operation between races for the common cause of an equal society, and the new generation of Black and Coloured people whose idea of the nature of the struggle is different from that of the previous generation.

In spite of the amplitude of Gordimer's creativity as a novelist, she is also a short story writer. According to her, 'A short story occurs, in the imaginative sense. To write one is to express from a situation in the exterior or interior world the life-giving dropage' burn a hole in it.<sup>7</sup> Her first short-story collection Face to Face (1949), appeared the year after the Africaner Nationalist government assumed power and each succeeding book has reflected the hardening grip of racist legislation upon every aspect of South African life. Second story collection, A World of Strangers (1961), developed a picture of society seen from the black man's point of view. Third collection, Not for Publication (1965), fourth,

Livingstone's Companions (1972), and fifth A Soldier's Embrace (1980) contributed a lot to her fame as a short story teller.

Jump and Other Stories (1991), deals with insecurity personal and political which is the common element in Nadine Gordimer's marvelous new short stories. The two stories from the collection treat child as a major character or childhood as a major phase. Child emerges as the metaphor for suffering humanity in all its horror. Most of the stories deal with twentieth-century Africa.

Nadine Gordimer is a dominant personality on international literary scene, a women of letters and a lady of humanitarian approach.

What is the point?



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