

Chapter Four

MY SON'S STORY

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My Son's Story¹ has received diverse critical interpretations. For instance, Liliance Louvel discovers that 'the isotopy of fragmentation constitutes a unifying web structurally present at the level of story, text and narration.'² Ipsbita Chanda argues that the choice of the particular framework in the novel reveals 'the possibility within which the white writer is able to bring her support for the struggle into her work, not only on the level of theme, but also on that of narratorial strategy.'³ Jorshinele T. Sonza regards the novel, on the other hand, as a first 'definitive text' which informs the reader that Gordimer has, 'in the making of South Africa's destiny, surrendered to black women the privileged position of white women.'⁴

Yet the novel offers rich interpretative potential for meaning, especially, in its apparently obvious yet essential socio-psychological attempt to historicize South African reality in humanistic terms of an individual's growth from childhood to youth. Of course, critics have located this stance in their brief

reference to Will's role in the novel. For instance, Chanda agrees that the book maps 'Will's story of the coming of maturity',⁵ though Sonny's story is 'central in terms of space and theme'.⁶ Sonza prefers to validate Will as 'the point of view in the story', through whom 'Gordimer identifies the traces and residues of the oppression violating the black body politic.'⁷ Louvel also notes how Will's book 'establishes a community between his younger self and his mature self',⁸ but thinks that 'the possessor of the book and ultimate "editor" is the father reading his 'son's story ', his side of their relationship.'⁹

Both thematically and structurally My Son's Story is the son's- Will's-story. On the fictive level, it is supposed to be the first novel of Will, Gordimer's writer - persona, who tries to narrates his crucial experience of growth in terms of his struggle to understand his political activist father and his political revolutionary mother. Gordimer isolates the two stages of Will's growth - his growth as a child- adolescent and his growth as a man. She allocates narrational responsibilities to both figures. The novel is Will's confession. Will, the child-adolescent, is devised as the first person while Will, the man, is attributed the role of the third person

narrator. The latter narrator objectifies, enlarges, neutralises or revises, if necessary, the first person narration. Will confesses, 'I've imagined — what others would be doing, saying and feeling in the gaps between my witness'. (p.276) On the thematic level, the novel illustrates how Sonny's son is again proud of his father in the end. He, thus, becomes an imagistic clarification of the line from William Shakespeare's sonnet selected by Gordimer for the novel, 'You had a father, let your son say so'.

Will's narrativisation of his experience can be comprehended as a psychological process of growth in three stages -

- I Child secure within the parent's identity
- II Child-adolescent's awareness of identity and the struggle to possess it
- III The identity - oriented youth as a reconciled man

I Child Secure within the Parent's Identity

Sonny, the renowned politician, one of the black learned, the best orator, the organiser of New Black Alliances committee, has elder son William / Will, and younger daughter, Baby. Aila, his wife, is a charming, devoted wife and caretaker mother to her kids. Will's childhood memories are full of affection

of the parents. Sonny and Aila try to give maximum time to the development of their kids. 'When Baby was born, the young mother would sit at her books between feeds and household tasks, and the younger father would be on the other side of the table, correcting his pupils' papers'.(p.10) They live in 'ghetto' yet it is an ideal life, a dreamland for the child. They spend their time in watching cinema; buy chips from the Greek's shop; carefully put the crumpled paper into the municipal trash baskets. Sonny, the teacher, pays attention to his kid's study. Aila helps them in keeping fit, mentally and physically. Sonny loves the great dramatist William Shakespeare passionately and has named his son after him. He wants Will to be a writer like him. Will belongs to a community which has great faith and respect for the family.

II Child - Adolescent's Awareness of Identity and the Struggle to Possess it

Will, the child on the verge of adolescence and part of the South African racialist environment, is initiated into an awareness of his sexual identity through the traumatic experience of his unexpected meeting with the father coming out of the cinema hall along with his white mistress. He narrates 'So I was in the foyer waiting to get into a five o'clock performance at one of the cinemas

in a new complex and my father and a woman came out of the earlier performance in another'. (p.3) The woman, Hannah, is a white lady feminist, and works for various social organizations in South Africa.

Will's immediate reaction as a child to the father's extra-material affair is his shock at the father's betrayal of the mother complicated by his sense of guilt for his inability to betray the father's trust in him. It is complicated further by Will's sense of anger against the father for putting him in the trap of silence. Will's set of responses are dominated violently by the sense of jealousy, as a budding adolescent, for the father regarded as a sexual opponent in possession of the sex object, Hannah. The same day, they meet in their house. They do not show any sign of guilt to each other. Will observes a face of criminal in him. He notes, 'And the voice was an echo from another life, where he was my father giving me his usual measured modest advice'. (p.4)

The awareness of Will's sex identity develops into an inner conflict for the boy unable to compromise his childhood image of a beloved father with that of a betraying lover. In a sense, Will's process of assertion of identity - independent of father / parents - assumes the form of struggle to liberate himself from the childhood

mind-set. The writer introduces structural check - points in the narrative to mark this process. The liberation from the childhood mind - set involves, in its turn, liberation from the childhood images of both the father and the mother. Hence, the novel is structurally divided in two parts - the earlier and the longer part devoted to the course of Sonny's relationship with Hannah; and the latter, and the shorter part devoted to Aila as a political revolutionary in action - both perceived by Will, the child-adolescent.

As a child, Will is devoted to his parents, especially to his mother. As the narrative recurrently stresses, "the boy was 'her' child; Baby was 'his' ".(p.136) He loses respect for his father after the secret knowledge of Sonny's relationship with Hannah. However, he considers it his responsibility to not hide it from the mother although he hates his father for it. He is anxious to keep his mother's image of her husband intact. He states, 'I didn't want my mother to think about him in any other way but the gentle, trusting way'. (p.59)

Will's excessive attachment to the parents and the family prevents his exposure to the exterior world of experience. Consequently, his capacities to respond to life positively, are completely paralysed. He cannot forget that father who used to

bring 'children's books and read to us'. (p.151) He also remembers how 'mostly we did things together - my mother, my father and we children'. (p.157) He remembers regretfully 'Daddy's old ambitions for his children to be useful, therefore educated citizens'. (p.78) The life in the veld in the house at Benoni-Son-of- Sorrow, where his father was a devoted school teacher, is deeply engraved on the heart of the little boy. Hence he tends to assess every act and word of Sonny as the worst treachery.

Adolescence storms Will's interior landscape and finds outlet, on the unconscious level, in the form of his sense of jealousy for his father as Hannah's sex partner. He imagines himself with his father's blonde. 'The wet dreams I have, a schoolboy who's never slept with a woman, are blonde'. (p.14) Nurtured in the racist environment of colonial South Africa, Will the black teenager, responds to his father's white woman with almost perverted intensity. His persistent sex desire for Hannah accomplishes his initiation into the process of the assertion of his own sexual identity as an adolescent. But it also involves his fierce hatred for the whites so that a sex act is regarded by the black boy as a kind of revenge by the oppressed against the oppressor. The novelist stresses this political context of the psychological phenomenon when she reveals

that Will's reaction to his father's woman is also the result of his 'additional knowledge that his father's woman belongs to a race that is the cause of oppression.'(p.3) The sex is the weapon of the oppressed against the oppressor in the politics of power as shown by a number of African writers. For instance, one of the black characters from Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novel, A Grain of Wheat rapes a white woman in colonial Kenya; and his justification is - 'White man nothing. Doing to you what you did to us - to black people.'¹⁰

Gordimer carries attention to the complex nature of influence of apartheid environment on the growth of children through Will's painful experience of his racialism preventing the healthy expression of his sexuality as an adolescent. It is one of the ways in which the novelist examines - 'the strange relationship between black and white 'in which' there are levels of original understanding that can not come easily to a complete outsider'.¹¹ Dieter Ricmenachneider also acknowledges 'the effects of racial suppression on the psyche and the emotional reactions of black characters'.¹²

Will's obsession with sex as Hannah's partner is mixed with his sense of guilt. He compares Hannah with his mother and

confesses that he can never imagine his mother as a sex object although she is also a female of Hannah's age. The boy argues within himself, 'I have terrible thoughts. About her. About my father with her. I imagine them...could I ever think of my mother like that!' (p. 93)

Will's first visit to Hannah's house as his father's messenger proves to be the most torturous experience for the sex-conscious boy. Sonny sends him to her because he thinks of Will selfishly to be 'man like himself.' (p.94) forgetting Will to be still a child, psychologically. Will is overcome by self-hatred and self-pity when he realises, 'I have been sent to where she lives. Where he goes to her. ... could you believe it?' (p. 81) His interior monologue explains his real condition of mind 'What a buffoon he made of me, his son, backward, stumbling along behind, aping his lies. Poor Tom to his Lear' (p. 57)

Hannah's home is 'one - woman - empire' for Will. He observes the room, panties and other female articles, which he sees in his house but had no attraction for them. He imagines his father's affair, there. He blames his father for his intrigue in middle age and envy's him for his not having the same. He blames, 'He sent me to her to show me it's not my turn yet. He's not moving aside,

off women's bodies, for me. I needn't think, because I'am tall as he is and I've got the same things between my legs.' (p. 94)

The child Will is compelled into the role of man of the family in the place of his father. On the night of Baby's attempted suicide, he is by the side of his mother to help her. The rebellious boy discovers opportunities to dominate the father who appears to defeat him as Hannah's sex partner. He desires even to blackmail his father when he bets, 'He can't order me, during the holidays, to finish reading the set - works for next term --- I'll bet I could bring up the question of a motorbike again now, and maybe I'd get it ?' (p.46)

The novelist uses the character of Baby, the elder sister of Will, as a means to emphasize the problem of growth of Will as an adolescent boy. Baby spends more time in her friend - circle than with her family. She often visits a flat of two Indian fellows. They exploit her by tempting her with 'job' because they notice her job - oriented attitude. Education has always minor importance for Baby. Will meets her friends but he never enjoys that type of company. He criticises the atmosphere in the flat, 'What was there to do but smoke. --- When I wanted to get away from them and their lousy yakking and yelling and dancing like a pack of drunk wild beasts,

there was a couple busy on the bed. They hadn't even shut the door'. (p.79)

Will's agonizing experience of growth towards maturity is complicated by his sense of jealousy for Baby. Baby is one step further to her father, who gives speeches but has no direct participation in revolutionary activities. Baby works for refugees. Sonny is astonished by the news. His daughter has not consulted him in taking even such a big decision. Destabilization of the family starts. Aila and Will, both need Sonny's consolation but he needs Hannah - 'Needing Hannah'. (p.57, p.84) Though Baby frustrates hopes of her parents, she is praised for her broad perspective and noble task. Will tries to fulfil his parents' expectations, yet he is unnoticed. He sometimes feels his parents to be partial. But he accepts the truth that his father is admired among his comrades when his daughter skips the country to join the freedom fighters. She fulfils the dream of his father. Thus, temporary jealousy of Will towards Baby and his father, changes into permanent admiration. Baby rightly pinpoints Will's psychological difficulty to adjust with the changing age as she explains, 'the trouble with you, you don't grow up'. She calls him significantly 'a case of arrested development'. (p.120)

III The identity - Oriented Youth as a Reconciled Man

Will's official introduction to sex as an adult coincides with his matriculation. His parents offer him motorbike which he never demands. He asks his parents to pay him to go away for a week as the celebration of his success in matric. He goes to Durban on the bike and picks up a girl on the beach the first day. For the first time, he finds sex - partner and enjoys for six days. He narrates it very practically as one of the needs of life. His journey starts from 'wet dreams' and ends with sex experience. He envies his father for having blonde but when he goes through the same process, the hatred changes into sympathy. The utopian innocence of childhood is substituted by adult understanding.

Will's own adulthood creates within him the willingness to understand his father as an adult. Sonny's weakening relationship with Hannah strengthens Will's relationship with Sonny. Will observes his father's restlessness when he waits for his woman's phone call. He laughs secretly at Sonny when Sonny tries his best to prove Hannah as unprohibited immigrant. He notices his father's strong need of her. She leaves South Africa for the second time permanently as she has got directorial post in the United Nations, High Commission for Refugees. Sonny is left

alone to face the life of neglect. He is isolated by his woman as well as by his wife. Will's jealousy for the father turns into sympathy. One more reason of Will's sympathetic understanding of his father is that Sonny's comrades and his party dismiss him from the post of responsibility because they suspect his integrity.

Will's adult understanding of his mother's essential identity as a political revolutionary emerges gradually in the course of the narrative. Will finds photographs of Aila in her dressing table drawer. He does not get any clue about the need of these photographs. He finds his mother's passport about which she never mentions to his father. He worries 'Where is she going ? Is she going to leave him ? Wild idea --- my mother'. (p.146) Will has seen one side of the coin i.e. his hospitable, polite mother, 'a stay - at - home wife/ mother'. (p.147) He has not seen the other side of Aila. He interprets her getting passport as an attempt to distance herself from him, his record, his activities, his life. Thus Aila goes to Lusaka to meet her daughter. She thinks more of Baby than of Will.

Will gets opportunity of father's association when he takes charge of the house in Aila's first absence; interacts with his father and plays the role of the father - figure in the house. He

spends time in playing chess with his father. Sonny's occasional love for him is suspected by him. He says 'But I'm careful. I don't know what he may be trying to get me into, now'. (p.150) One day, Will comes late and sees the lights are still on. He mistakes father to be waiting for him. On the contrary, he is engaged in a secret meeting with his comrades. After the meeting, the father visits his bedroom; talks about his reading books and gradually comes to the point, 'Will, you didn't hear anyone talking and you didn't hear anyone leave'. (p.152) He indirectly warns him to shut his mouth.

Will has an affair with a girl. He boldly compares his affair to that of his father, 'Just like Dad. My sex life has no home'. (p.185) He comes to know the truth that the girl and his family have great respect for Sonny and his family. The girl tells everybody that her lover is 'the famous Sonny's son ? her parents trust him with her because they are impressed by the high moral standards of a family who live for others --- '. (p.185) He accepts that he wins the girl due to his father's greatness.

Once, the police in plain clothes come to search Will's house as well as to arrest his mother. She is arrested by them under the crime of hiding explosives in the house. Will, the only eye-witness, the only man in the house, blames his father for it, 'The

bastard. That bastard, what has he done now ! What has he done to get you inside ! I'll kill him !' (p.206) He has wrong impression that the father has hidden the explosives. It is found out that Amnesty International and other groups are involved with the political imprisonment of Aila. She is arrested under 'the internal security act'. Newspapers headline the news - 'Hand - Grenades in Garage - Housewife Living Illegally in White Suburb Alleged Harboured Terror Cache'. (p. 237)

Aila's arrest proves to be crucial for re-establishing the essential unity of the family - that unity for which Will, the child - adolescent, had yearned nostalgically. Both Sonny and Will are determined to save Aila from punishment. He finds that his father manages something with the lawyers. He is surprised when he comes to know that the father is taking responsibility of the mother on his shoulders Sonny asks the police, ' I'm willing to be involved up to the hilt, so long as they let her go --- Can't you do something, get them to let her out and take me as hostage for her?'- (p.219) Everyone is sure about Sonny that he can not do such business. Will, finally, comes to know that his mother and not his father is the real criminal. He starts taking care of his father. He does not allow him to go alone to the police station. They both do all domestic

duties. His father handles police and manages to provide food and clothes to his mother in jail. He narrates, 'We eat together and go over the details of that night and anything else of relevance that might be recalled'. (p.221) Sonny decides to take blame on his shoulder. Will is impressed and his respect for his father grows double. He says, 'No man - no husband - could do more, even if he were to have loved my mother'. (p.221) But before his father can go to the police and do so the lawyer shows the signed statement in which his mother has admitted that she consented 'to allow the storeroom to be used to store certain person's property for a few nights'. (p.222)

Instead of responding to Aila's secretive political activities as a betrayal with him, Will regards them with a deep sense of admiration. He interrogates himself, 'Where did my mother learn these things? How, without his having noticed it, had she come to kinds of knowledge that were not for her?--- Whom did she know whose names she know whose names she couldn't reveal?' (p.222) Still Will gets relief with the thought that though she is imprisoned, she is free from the worries of his father and himself. Aila is kept in some remote prison. Will and Sonny are not told about the place. Hannah helps them to find it out. Will now

appreciates Hannah's comradeship and sportive nature. Will, the adult man does not hate her any more. He loves his mother and wants her release only. He notices that his father is respected in court because he teaches many of the people there. Even his girlfriend is ready to conduct domestic work for their help, but he rejects as it is his and his father's business. He is mature enough to handle his studies, his food and helps his father in court - matter. He is active, efficient and confident in helping his parents during this critical period.

Notably enough, Aila, the domestic wife, is transformed into a revolutionary due to the traumatic news of the escape of Baby's child from being killed when the house was bombed. It compels Aila to work for the refugees. She helps the organisation and is caught red-handed. Dr. Jasood pays ten thousand for Aila's bail. When she needs some help, it is Will who helps her. Thus Will offers his service for his parents ' sake. He becomes clerk for his father in court - yard. He does cooking, cleaning and even becomes secret agent to his father. He blames himself for his mother's arrest. He thinks that if he had noticed his mother's movements keenly, he would have done something to avoid her arrest.

Will sees his father's futile attempt to console her that she would be free of the charge soon. Will, the adolescent boy, knows well that Aila is one of the terrorists to the white government. He knows his role as a son of revolutionaries. 'I've been the cover for both of them, That sticks ! -- ; the silence, she kept, for my protection, made me her conspirator, just as I've been his'. (p.234) Will comes to know in the court that Hannah has gone overseas in order to do great job. He thinks about his father, 'So he was the good husband, the good comrade because that woman was gone'. (p.237)

Will goes to see Hannah's deserted house. He cannot explain the reason behind it. 'What did I think I was going to see there ? May be I couldn't believe it; he, she and I have been bound so long'. (p.237) He knows that Hannah has got job in London, still he peeps in her house. It shows his attraction for her. His outer self is in love with his mother but his inner self is disappointed for not being able to see Hannah, any longer. Sonny prepares Aila for trial. Will observes that his father's long experience of trials, helps Aila in preparing her. Aila is quite sincere in making defense. Will witnesses his parents' quarrel over Baby's decisions. Sonny blames

Baby for making Aila the revolutionary. But Aila denies the charges against Baby.

Aila's case comes before the court and she is charged of hiding explosives like an RPG -7 rocket - launcher, two RGP -7 rockets, three RG-42 hand grenades, two limpet - mines, two FM-57 land mines, and a length of flower curtained material. Will is shocked because he was present at the time of raid and the RPG- 7 launcher and rockets are not in the cache he had seen unwrapped from the curtain off - cuts in the storeroom. When he finds false charges put against his mother he bursts out of anger and wants to shout at the judge. But his conditioning to prisons and courts keeps him down. He converses with the lawyers and assures them that the whole allegation is false. The lawyers have got confidence in his ability of being successfully cross - examined. Will, the child, goes back in the world of his childhood once more. He remembers how the father was full of pride for him then as he is now when he finds that his son can turn the tables and may save his mother. Will's evidence is the only card in lawyers' hand, to save his mother from punishment. The government is going to play, on the other hand, ' on the fact that there's special sentiment involved, a young man

naturally will lie, if it's a question of family — after all, it's his mother'. (p.249)

My Son's Story may be supposed to evolve Will's relationship with his mother in Freudian terms. Will, in his early adulthood feels sexually attracted towards Aila especially after her arrest. Will never envies Aila like Hannah but still he is very much attached, he notices her serpentine feminine beauty. He calls her once like lover - "Aila " (p.254) Ettin also has regarded Oedipal theme to be central for Gordimer's work.¹³ Will, the shy and timid youth, now prepares to challenge the system. The innocent child turns into confident youth ! But his mother does not allow him to take risk for her sake. Sonny convinces her, 'He's my son, too. Would I put him in any danger ?' (p.251) He distinguishes the ability of his parents, thus 'Sonny is only "one of the crowd" while his mother is the real performer : I imagine the freedom songs and salutes for Aila'. (p.226)

To protect her Will, Aila disappears from the scene; she leaves the country. Sonny tells his son that it is leadership's decision that Aila should go because the case against her is very serious and in the course of evidence important information about the movement may be revealed. On Sonny's birthday, he receives

greeting from Baby, Aila and his son-in-law. It proves that Aila is safe with Baby. He demands passport but it is rejected. He does not get opportunity to meet his grandson. Sonny is fifty two, and loses his health. Sonny and Will, now live under one roof. They live like so many others of their kind whose families are fragmented in the diaspora of exile, code names, underground activity, people for whom a real home and attachments are something for others who will come after.

Will saves some money from his part-time job and buys word - processor. He works late night. Both live together, busy with their own business. They live so far in the white suburb illegally. White people criticise them. Sonny gets opportunity to meet with the highest level of leadership in the hospitality of President Kaunda's presidential residence. He is also able, at last, to visit Lusaka officially, to meet his daughter, wife, son-in-law and grandson.

When Sonny returns, he is shocked to learn that his house was burned by the mob. Will narrates the event of Saturday night. He sees crowd, on his return from duty, on the road but it is usually crowded on Saturday. Whites gather together and ask Sonny and his family to quit the white suburb. Will tries to save his

house. He screams 'This is my father's house !' (p.272) But in vain. He has flashbacks of all the main events he has witnessed in that house. Being alone, he cannot save it from the angry mob. That Saturday night, horrible for him, he does not sleep there but goes to his new girl. At night, someone in the crowd returns ; petrol-bombs the house and burns it to the ground. The last scene is the climax of calamities in Will's life. He and his father wander in the burnt house. Everywhere they see the ashes of their dreams, of their past and present life. Sonny cries that they will revive like 'Phoenix' (p. 274) whites cannot destroy the blacks. The house stands for Will's childhood. The burning of the house may be interpreted symbolically as liberation of Will from the obsession of childhood image of the family woven around his father and mother. On the obvious level, it symbolizes the tragedy of political revolutionaries in South Africa ironically made homeless in their own homeland.

Will fulfils the dream of his father by writing his first book. His story ends with a beautiful poem addressed to Dove, the bird, who is the symbol of freedom - free to fly high, without any chains. Dove is the son's poetic image of the restless spirit of politically committed blacks like his father. It reveals the inner urge

of the blacks for freedom struggling to maintain their faith in peace in spite of frustrations. Though the bird carries - 'sprig of olive in its beak', it dashes against the bars and breaks its neck 'against the stone walls'. (p. 277)

The cyclic journey of Will thus, begins with the absolute trust in the father; advances through the child - adolescent's bitter estrangement with him because of the his extramarital affair with a white woman only to be completed with the adult son's realisation of the father's greatness as an activist in spite of his weaknesses as a man. It leads to re-establishment of the son's absolute trust in him once again. Overcome by the pride for his family's sacrifice, Will thinks, 'My father, the famous Sonny, Baby the revolutionary exile, Aila, the accomplice of Umkhonto weSizwe ; they are our family's sacrifice for the people, there's no need of me, who needs someone like me? They are the heroes'. (p.251) My Son's Story may hence, be described as intellectualization of the political struggle through Sonny and Hannah, activation of its revolutionary content through Aila and Baby, and personalization of its human content through Will.

References

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