

Race, Identity and Recognition in South African Literature: A Global Reading of Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*

Professor Manju Srivastava¹, Dr. Seema Nigam²

¹Professor, Department of English, D.A-V. College, Kanpur

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, D.B.S. College, Kanpur

Abstract:

South Africa is still considered the most unequal country in the world. South African literature is shaped by the apartheid system that denies recognition to the majority and defines identity through race and ideology. Nadine Gordimer, one of South Africa's most acclaimed writers and Nobel Laureate (1991), consistently writes about the apartheid reality- racism, injustice and liberation. *Burger's Daughter* (1979) introduces the protagonist as the daughter of Lionel Burger, a communist and anti-apartheid martyr and traces her journey from childhood to adulthood, exploring the trials of a political orphan in a racist society where a private search for Identity is inseparable from the collective struggle for recognition, freedom and justice. The study aims to bring to the fore South African realities along postcolonial issues of race, identity and recognition to contribute to the broader understandings of decolonization, political freedom, growth, in global context.

Keywords: Racism, identity, Apartheid, Postcolonialism , human dignity, decolonization.

'To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others' (Mandela, p.623).

Despite increased access to education and the sustained efforts of various movements and organisations, disparities continue to persist globally, manifesting at multiple levels and in diverse forms. Identities formed around racialised divisions have been a common concern of South African literature. With issues of race, identity, justice and human resilience, the South African narratives are engaging readers across cultures and nations.

South Africa, the southernmost country on the African continent, called 'the rainbow nation', with multiple ethnic groups including Black Africans, White South Africans, Coloured South Africans (of mixed race), Indian /Asian South Africans, and also 'unspecified / other', from various communities, Anglo-Affricaner, Indian, nguni Sotho, khoisans besides homo sexuals and queers has a very vast, rich and diverse history owing to its socio-political, cultural realities. Racial segregation had long existed in South Africa; the National Party (White minority government), upon winning election in 1948, established it as a system, intensifying apartheid practices through legislation, privileging only the white minority. Tyranny and totalitarianism, the cruel forms of dictatorship, the complex relations between colonizers and the colonized forced people to fight and oppose with rebelliousness and Nadine

Gordimer finds, 'a generic colonialism' in South Africa ,unrolling terror and oppression, proposing a pattern of biblical Eve into the ideological and political realm of the entire world.

Tracing Briefly looking into the major periods, events and era-defining movements stemming from the concerns and the lived experiences of the non- white populace, the paper examines the socio- political realities of apartheid South Africa where inequality and injustice along race, class, gender and geography continue to exist even long after it has become a democracy. There is a continued search for personal and collective identity in South African writings and the writers' resentment against racial segregation,oppression, victimization, and suffering is clearly reflected in their works. The paper aims to bring out racialised divisions, discrimination and diaspora issues that the individuals encounter while negotiating their identities both in the homeland and abroad, exploring how these struggles lead to the denial of recognition, belonging and growth.

Tracing its beginnings from the Pre- colonial period, South African literature existed in the forms of oral literature- myths, folktales , legends , songs, proverbs, praise poems, stories all rooted in the socio-cultural, political struggle of the nation, preserving history, teaching and entertaining. These were in indigenous languages. The epic of Sundiata and Anansi stories are the best examples. Written in Ethiopia, Arabic and Ajami, early writing evolved in connection with these oral traditions and was around morality, kingship, religion and philosophy. Timbuktu (Mali) and Alexandria (Egypt) used to be the centres of learning. Mapping the Colonial Rule, the Dutch East India Company made its first settlement in Cape town followed by large - scale colonization of European powers - Britain, France, Portugal ,Belgium, Germany , Spain , Italy, making up Africa after 1884- 85 Berlin Conference, legitimizing the continent's division among European nations. Europeans colonized it.This 'Scramble for Africa', rush to control and conquer lands, dividing ethnic groups, led to tensions and conflicts and Apartheid law enforcement in 1948 through violence, imprisonment and other forms of oppression worsened the situation. The 'apartheid'- 'apartness in Afrikaans' official policy of government strictly maintained the system of oppression and domination from 1948-1990. White people made all the rules. Promoting western culture and only European languages, the poor blacks were suppressed, subjugated along with all their nationalist thoughts, beliefs and identity . There were put in place hundreds of race laws, limiting the freedom of workers, regulating the relations between the races.Population Registration Act 1950, Group Areas Act 1950, Bantu Education Act 1953, Pass Laws strengthened in 1952, Separate Amenities Act 1953, Suppression of Communism Act 1950, Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act 1949 crumbled the social structure of South Africa forever. The apartheid signs were common in all cities of Africa dictating people of each race places to work and live.'Slegs Blankes' meaning 'whites only' designated spaces,places, seats and services , reserving good benches , toilets, parks, beaches,lifts and other facilities to whites and constantly separating, marginalizing and barring the country's black majority. Racial slurs were evident.. Forcing Non- whites to move to underdeveloped towns, denying them quality education, good jobs, lands and social interactions shaped their everyday life. There came notes of defiance , dissent and protest against this systemic oppression, inspiring a wave of politically charged writing. Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*, *July's People*, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness* are a few such examples. Exploring ancestral heritage,raising and cultivating Black Consciousness across Africa and its Diaspora, the 1930s Negritude Movement came in response to the dehumanizing practices of French colonialism and the injustices associated with racist and assimilationist policies. Originated in Paris, France among Francophone African and Caribbean intellectuals, key figures included Aime Ce'saire', Le'opold Se'nghor, and Le'on Gontron Damas. Their

voices appeared at the centre of global literary discourse, with a vision for a new world, grounded in equality and justice. Contributing to the rise of Pan-Africanism and struggle for independence in many African nations, it profoundly contributed to the postcolonial thought on identity, culture and resistance, sparking off subsequent literary movements like Civil Rights Movement, Black Arts Movement through art, literature, theatre and music (blues and jazz- literary metaphors for the apartheid struggle and beyond), symbolizing survival and creativity under oppression in different global contexts. Widespread violent protests, boycotts, uprisings like Soweto Uprising (1976), Sharpsville Massacre (1960), strikes including mine workers' strike and numerous acts of civil disobedience and political parties like the African National Congress(ANC) 1912 and the Pan--Africanist Congress(PAC), 1959 became a force in the fight against the apartheid. Due to some disagreements on the Freedom Charter and ANC's multiracialist strategy, PAC emerged, favouring a more radical African - centred approach , advocating for the political and social rights of the African population in South Africa in fighting apartheid. Both ANC and PAC were banned in 1960 and unbanned in 1990. The internal resistance and international pressure through organizations like the United Nations significantly impacted the South African economy, fuelling internal dissent. This led to negotiations with anti- apartheid leaders, unbanning of political parties, release of the political prisoners including Nelson Mandela, paving way for the first multiracial elections in 1994 and with the establishment of a new constitution - formation of a democratic government, the country's harsh, institutionalized system of racial segregation came to an end.

Writing Locating personal , familial and social identities, the paper examines Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* within its specific socio- political context analyzing how Rosa's struggle ultimately leads to a recognition of identity as dynamic, evolving and relational. Simultaneously, the novel exposes the persistent and unresolved tensions of race, identity and culture that threaten to fracture and destabilize the individual's personal life.

Writing from the personal experiences and observations of everyday life in apartheid South Africa, Nadine Gordimer is a powerful literary voice . With a sense of social responsibility as a South African writer, she views literature as a form of truth- telling. Her *Burger's Daughter* along with many other works was banned by the apartheid government as the Publication Control Board found it "propagating Communist opinions", "creating a psychosis of revolution and rebellion", and "making several unbridled attacks against the authority entrusted with the maintenance of law and order and the safety of the state" (qtd. In Gordimer, *What Happened to Burger's Daughter*- 7). Despite being banned in South Africa, it received a prestigious South African literary award following its publication in Britain and was later accompanied by a companion text 'What Happened to Burger's Daughter' or 'How South African Censorship Works'. A member of the ANC, she is of the view that "the writer is of service to humankind only insofar as the writer uses the word even against his or her own loyalties, trusts the state of being as it is revealed, to hold somewhere in its complexity filaments of the cord of truth" (Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, Nobel Lecture-7)." Writing novels, short stories, essays, she focuses on the harsh realities of South African society and the complex human consequences of a segregated nation. Her works *Six Feet of the Country*(1956). *Something Out There*(1984) *Jump*, (1991), *The Lying Days* (1953), *The Conservationist* (1974), *Burger's Daughter* (1979), *July's People* (1981) *None to Accompany Me* (1994), *Pickup* ,(2001)*No Time Like the Present* (2012) explore the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals in a society divided by race and power. Inspired by real people and events that the novelist witnessed as an activist in South Africa, *Burger's Daughter* is an essential reading in apartheid context. Set in the 1970s, a period of intense racial segregation and political struggle, the novel is an account of the experiences of

the white activists working to dismantle apartheid while also exploring complexities within. Divided into three major sections, each section of the novel explores her struggle for personal identity along with the inherited identity of her activist parents, Lionel and Cathy Burger. In Part One, she is seen grappling with her childhood memories and the burden of political inheritance in her apartheid South Africa. Part Two is where she escapes to Europe pursuing a more private sense of self outside the political struggle. Part three is about Rosa's coming back to South Africa, participating in a demonstration where she is arrested. The protagonist is labelled as the offspring of state enemies, Lionel Burger and Cathy. Modelled on the real-life Africaner, Bram Fischer, Mandela's treason defence lawyer, Lionel Burger is a revered and revolutionary figure. Rosa is torn between her family's legacy of white communist anti-apartheid activism and an identity of her own which is both stifling and overwhelming for her. "She was not to be allowed to be herself, she was his daughter" (Gordimer, 1979, p.49). She is perceived by society, friends and comrades as no individual but as Burger's daughter, imposing a duty she did not choose. She is navigating her path. With her parents' deaths in prison, she is left alone, carrying the revolutionary tradition and facing the complex challenges of multifaceted apartheid. The local and the global are tied together as Rosa's identity is not simply inherited but constantly negotiated against the weight of her father's memory and the collective expectations of her society. Her childhood friend, Flora Donaldson speaks from the comfort of white liberal privilege, "You are not your father's daughter for nothing" (Gordimer, 1979, p.81). The political world dominates and it is illegal to be a communist and it is also illegal for people to gather without government permission. There is a constant sense of challenge and excitement as well as fear and pain in her life and that of her brother because of her martyred parents' radical heritage. Growing up with Bassie, a young black boy whom the Burgers had informally adopted when his father died in prison, she had seen her family supporting the cause of both white and black and her home, a refuge for political revolutionaries accommodating the both and thus, a microcosm of the entire country's social fabric. Rosa viewed Bassie as her brother but they were separated as she was sent to her father's family and Bassie was sent to his friends and they lost contact. The house is empty, with memories for her. Conrad, a student whom she had befriended during her father's trial, was also not a right company to her as he intervened in her personal decision regarding the political life she had inherited from her father and she parted ways, getting her own apartment. At a party, she catches a black student's sharp critique of white anti-apartheid activists, declaring that only Black people can liberate themselves. She comes to learn about black university students' movement to push the whites out of the communist party. Seeking to distance herself from the burdensome past, she decides to explore life beyond the borders of South Africa. "I couldn't stop myself. I don't know how to live in Lionel's country" (Burger's Daughter p.210). There is a detachment from the political legacy and she escapes to Europe where she does not have to worry about politics, arrest or surveillance or public expectations and can experience personal liberation and connection, claiming a life of her own. She thinks she would stay here with her father's first wife, Katya and it is here, she also falls in love with Bernard Chabalier, a Parisian academic. 'I am not Burger's daughter only' and there seems to be a new beginning. Using her last name, she has a lot of invitations to political events in London, but, her history catches up with her during an encounter with her childhood friend, Bassie, a bitter black activist and zwelinzima now who accuses her of being a traitor to her own family and that she is benefiting from her father's fame while black political prisoners remain unheard, forcing her to confront and question her choices. Rosa's interactions with both white and black South Africans reveal the persistent imbalance situating her own struggles within a wider racialised order as "cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, it is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of

'being' (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Bassie was cold, indifferent and had even made hurtful remarks about her activist parents who lived and died fighting for the Black population's rights. It was a pain to her. There is escape here but there is alienation also. Freedom is not merely geographical but tied to history, identity and belonging. Europe offered her physical distance from apartheid but no real liberation. Far away , she can recall the forms of oppression: physical punishment, "by lash, by fear, by hunger, by solitary confinement....."(Burger's Daughter p.27-28) and she is back to her South Africa, supporting the cause that might save the community. Protests erupt in Soweto among black school children turning into riots . White welfare workers are killed and the government squashes down the resistance. Seeking to reconcile her identity as Burger's daughter, she , finally arrives at the mantra i.e. 'Peace. Land.Bread.' Charged with subversion and abetting the student revolt, she is swept up and detained.

The title of the novel, Burger's Daughter reveals its central concerns with identity. Rosa's upbringing somewhere else to protect her from the violence surrounding her parents' radical activism as members of ANC, along with her adopted black brother Bassie, son of a fellow activist and, arrests, warrants and imprisonment leading to the early death of her parents in prison, is showing her unique relationship with her parents, family and the society. While carrying the weight of the ancestral legacy, she is also spending time with Bernard Chaballier in France with whom she has fallen in love and it is how she is carving out a sense of self, experiencing apolitical life. Inscribing life afresh is not possible as it is a racist society and there are hurtful remarks from her acquaintances, compelling her to continue her father's revolutionary work. There is a reconciliation with her heritage and a renewed commitment to the cause of equality across racial divides and she is back to her country, accepting her complicated role as Burger's Daughter, arriving at her Africaner grandmother's motto- 'Peace, Land, Bread' (epigraphal motto linked with the ANC slogan). She is taken into custody, but this signifies 'not an end but the transformation of her struggle into an open-ended 'becoming' (Hall, 225), revealing what is 'hidden.' Hall's theory of identity as a process of 'being' and 'becoming' aligns beautifully with Rosa's struggle between her inherited political identity and her evolving sense of 'self'. She cannot escape the historical 'being' of her identity (the daughter of Lionel Burger, a white communist martyr to the anti-apartheid cause), yet she is seen redefining both her political commitment and her personal freedom, performing a 'becoming' that destabilizes inherited binaries of race, politics and gender, a process through which the subject actively constructs the 'self'. Rosa's 'becoming' mirrors Beauvoir's assertion that identity is a continuous process of self - construction rather than a static inheritance. Here, Rosa occupies what Bhabha terms a "third space" of identity where personal freedom and political consciousness are redefined beyond fixed colonial and patriarchal notions. There are issues of universal concern and she chooses a course between unthinking, stifling orthodoxy and the atomistic autonomy. The study discloses that literature can serve both as resistance and revelation. Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter is both a South African and a global text. The struggle is not over. It is ongoing. The paper calls on a global audience to confront and resist enduring injustices and forms of discrimination based on race and identity which continue to persist, the world over.

References

1. Gordimer, Nadine. Burger's Daughter. London: Jonathan Cape, 1979.
2. Gordimer, Nadine. What Happened to Burger's Daughter.
3. London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1980.
4. Driver, Dorothy. "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women". In Women and Writing in South Africa: A Critical Anthology, edited by Cherry Clayton, Heinemann, 1994, pp.218-237.

5. Clingman, Stephen. The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside. London: Allen and Unwind, 1986.
6. Bhabha, Homi. The Location of Culture. Routledge, 1994.
7. Beauvoir, Simon de. The Second Sex, translated by H.M. Parshley. Vintage, 1974.