
THE PLIGHT OF ANTI-APARTHEID SUPPORTERS IN SOUTH AFRICA: A STUDY OF FEMALE CHARACTER IN NADINE GORDIMER'S BURGER'S DAUGHTER

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Abstract:

This paper proposes to study the female character, Rosemarie Burger of Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*, with relation to the miserable plight of being both a child and an adult who happens to participate and struggle in the ongoing anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Gordimer was inspired to pen this novel while she was waiting at a prison to visit a political detainee, where she saw a little girl standing at the gates of the prison to visit her detained mother. She kept pondering on the girl's situation and the family pressure that made her stand there. The child protagonist holds an eider-down on her belly and hot water bottle on another hand. She technically folded and placed a bit of paper holding a message, "Dear Mom, Hope you are all right", between the black rubber washer and the base of the screw-top of that bottle. The novel unfolds the family relationship and the social background of the fourteen-year-old girl Rosemarie. Her parents were passionate activists of South African anti-apartheid movement, and for which they were convicted and detained in prison where their life ended. Rosa is left alone with none to take care of her. She is placed in a puzzling situation all alone trying to learn the adult responsibilities even as a child. Nadine Gordimer is one of those socially committed non-black novelists of South Africa who showed an exceptional interest in creating an awareness of the social crisis in South Africa and sensitizes the issues of apartheid. She has discussed the contemporary socio-political issues in her novels, articles, interviews, and books. Her novels *The Lying Days*, *A World of Strangers*, *The Late Bourgeois World*, *The Conservationist*, *July's People*, and *Burger's Daughter* encapsulate the predicament of the Blacks in apartheid, South Africa.

Keywords: female character, Gordimer, socio-political, social crisis, South Africa.

Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* can be seen as one of the vibrant novels as it projects the reality of African apartheid society, especially the plights of women during such political unrest. Through this novel, Gordimer wages a war against the social evils that caused untold damage to women during the apartheid government. As a social activist, Gordimer wages war against the government and also voices to mitigate the age-long suppression and oppression of women in South Africa. The overt political leadership has been dominated by men and women were always considered secondary. But with the emergence of apartheid, women played a crucial role in basic issues, and organizing and involving the masses in the struggle. This paper aims to analyze the pitiable existence of women and their state of marginalization, discrimination, and isolation from mainstream society. In general African, Literature is a resistance Literature. The present paper argues the atrocities and humiliation leveled against Women, especially on white women by her own community. This apparently gets expressed in the very opening line of *Burger's Daughter*: "The schoolgirl stood neither in the first rank before the prison neither doors nor hung back" (1).

This novel explores the mental predicament of a girl, named Rosa: Gordimer projects Rosa before the readers to show how women in South Africa undergo problems at various levels. This novel remorsefully traces the life of a white girl from her girlhood to adulthood. The image of her pathetic state is carefully reflected in this present study. Gordimer too reminiscence her past life, and relives the experiences of a school girl. This novel was conceived when she accidentally met a girl in front of a prison that forms the core of the theme. Hence the novel delineates the acute sensitiveness of her experiences which are reflected in *Burger's Daughter*.

Rosa is a dynamic character who shares her personal experiences like the existence of domestic sufferings, betrayal, alienation, subjugation, longing for human relations, and displacement. It further explores the conflict between the survival of an individual and her crisis of the identity in a challenging society. Rosa is in a state of acceptance of her alienation in advance and her subsequent realization of her mother's imprisonment and "her father also soon going to be detained as well" (*Burger's Daughter* 6). "The reality must have been different from the acceptance in advance; it's impossible to conquer all fear and loss by preparation" (*Burger's Daughter* 9). Here Gordimer manifests the state of a girl who suffers from the illness of loneliness. Why a fourteen-year-old girl should suffer for no fault of hers. It becomes necessary to briefly examine her mother's life also. Mrs. Lionel is an activist of the communist party which "struggled for Black rights and the extension of the franchise to the Black majority" (*Burger's Daughter* 21). Rosa's mother is a consummate revolutionary, stoic in the face of personal tragedy, persecution, the impending death - a perfect companion for Lionel, Rosa's father. Her active underground participation in the organization of the communist party led her to imprisonment and custody death when the party was banned by the government.

The following line clearly states the plights of women in Africa are all about suffering and nothing else. "It's about suffering. How to end suffering. And it ends in suffering" (*Burger's Daughter* 344-45). It is not only a view on the endangered situation of African women but also on women of this world. They suffered because they wanted to be liberated from the thrust of political slaughter. Over a period of years, Rosa comes to understand the impact of the South African political suppression on her. This happens immediately after the Sharpeville Massacre (turned out the history of the Africa on 21st March 1960, when the Pan African Congress (PAC) organized and led a protest against the pass laws of apartheid system, police fired on the crowd of unarmed protestors, killing 69 innocent people and leaving injured 180 people), and she has compared this massacre with her personal pain of menstruation period: "I am within that monthly crisis of destruction, the purging, tearing, draining of my own structure" (*Burger's Daughter* 10).

She feels the pressure from the government that continued to watch her and restrict her movement after her father's death. But, "Rosa had been armed very young by her parents against the shock of such contingencies by the assumption that imprisonment was part of the responsibilities of grown-up life" (49). She never escapes from her responsibilities, principle, and activism that her parents pursued. She follows her father's footsteps even if it resulted in inevitable imprisonment. "She wanted to get out of the country because it was necessary to set up new lines" (*Burger's Daughter* 176).

I look at the life of Rosa, it is clear that white power is a crucial component in the consolidation of the apartheid system even to the white girl, which means the apartheid rule does not spare even a white. Gordimer evidenced the excruciating existence of women in during apartheid regime. *Burger's Daughter* recapitulates the soreness, disgrace, ignominy, share, and subjugation experienced by the women-the voiceless marginal gender that has been downgraded in the pyramid of African apartheid system: "After the donkey, I couldn't stop myself. I don't know how to live in Lionel's country". (213) The predicament of white women is perceived with all diligence because the protagonist of this novel confesses her true state of miseries of being a woman, existing particularly during a period of violence, social injustice and tyranny of the white administration. She compares herself to a donkey: "the donkey didn't cry out" (211) even it was violently salaamed (beaten), again and again by the whip. It will give out "bestial snort and squeal of excruciation" (210) and the donkey will be continually beaten up because " there is no way out of the shafts" (211). The donkey had to succumb to the agony. Like the donkey, Rosa to does not find a way to get out from that oppression of the apartheid country. In order to escape the tormenting adventure of her Africa, she compromises her to secure a passport and seeks refuge in Europe with Lionel's first wife, an apolitical woman who knew "how to defect from him" (264).

Rosa is poked by the outraged apartheid rule in every aspect of her life. "It was hardly credible to surveillance that burger's daughter could expect" (176). "Surveillance watched her go in" (192). The conflict between the survival of an individual and the crisis of the liberation in the challenging society is said thus:

These are the things that move me now- I mean a sudden shift, a tumultuous upheaval, an uncontrollable displacement... I don't know what metaphors to use to describe the process by which I'm making my own metaphors for suffering. (198)

Rosa enables us to seek meaning for her metaphors. She compares the intestines violent stir up by the small amount of irritant was thrown into the digestive tract. The irritant elements such as exploitation, the dominance of the white rulers, enslavement, segregation are thrown into the digestive tract to get stirs up freedom, justice, and equality of women. The women in apartheid are not considered even as a being in Africa. The girl's freedom in society is also reduced by the apartheid system that made them suffer physically and psychologically based on gender discrimination. During the apartheid period, inequality was engaged in many places like a bus stop, railway station, educational institution, working places and even in the religious gatherings. This kind of terrible racial atrocities is amply evidenced by Rosa's, Mama Mkhonza. He states: "These people! Really Terrible"(202), and places a vibrant question on behalf of Rosa before the apartheid rulers, asking that "What do they want with a young girl? Why can't they leave you alone just to live" (202)? The dominant notion of the Apartheid system is based on the concept of pollution and impurity. Throughout the history of Africa, there have been the class, gender, race revolts and inhumane practices are dehumanized the South African women in every sphere.

"Disease, drowning, arrest, imprisonment" (39). *Burger's Daughter* relentlessly reflects the South African white women and their state during the height of apartheid and it also presents an account of lives where family relationships, rites of passage and instinctive human responses are all sublimated by political considerations. This is, in fact, the socio-political mood of most South African women were scarred by civil wars, violence, ethnic strife and other forms of conflicted relationships. The problems that South African women face are that they encounter hostile social elements that are embedded in the structure of their societies.

It becomes to the imperative to discuss another character in this novel, Flora Donaldson. She also actively engages herself in the anti-apartheid movement. "She is amateur in her perceptions as well as her acts". (*Burger's Daughter* 199) A talented and brave one protected the "Nelson Mandela, successfully hidden in her wine cellar when he went in and out of the country illegally before the Rivonia Trial". (199) In this regard, Mary E. Modupe Kolawale observes women's politically active roles in the alternation of the socio-political oppressive structure. She argues:

Other instances of women's dynamic involvement in the struggle against oppression at crucial periods in the history of the continent show that women's passivity or subjugation is not an inalienable aspect of African culture. (Kolawole 27)

After her return from Europe, she is jailed again, where she quickly makes contact with Marisa Kgosane and other women in the movement who are behind bars again, Rosa is beyond indulging in a symbolic sisterhood as a replacement for political action. Instead, she participates in the camaraderie of genuine sorority created to subvert the state-imposed female society in which these political prisoners must live. "A few white people were detained, arrested, and house-arrested or banned on 19th Oct 1977, and in the weeks following. The burger girl was one" (*Burger's Daughter* 353).

The novel ends with Rosa, who is in prison "under section 6 of the Terrorism Act" (373), writing a letter to her father's first wife. Her message has been cut off in mid-sentence. It signifies the miserable state of a detained woman because the prison authority had deleted her message. It is clearly understood that even the freedom to write was restricted by the prison censor board: "In which case she'll probably be house-arrested as soon as she's released...." (374). She has come to a full circle that she finds herself in the same situation as her parents are. Gordimer had given the tortuous experience of Rosa, as a symbol for African women's sufferings who are gradually destroyed physically, mentally and even spiritually when supporting the Black cause in the Apartheid system. She is depicted as a point of convergence for all manner of oppression like a mule; she has been exploited and dehumanized by white's outraged rule.

The African continent is a chaotic and violent place to live in. An observation has often been made, especially when the racist, ethnic and sexist tendencies that have been allowed to develop in African societies are considered. (Kehinde 169)

The representation of female characters in the field of political activism in *Burger's Daughter* makes the reader look at the politically active roles played by women in order to break down the social constraints impending their fulfillment. This paper portrays the involvement of woman-Rosa, who resists the social-political oppression by taking her destiny in her own hand. "She is fulfilling her cultural task of showing that resistance to white domination comes not only from blacks but from whites as well" (Panirao 175). She has never lost sight of the fact that meaningful change for her is the total destruction of the apartheid system.

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