



APPROPRIATION AND SUBVERSION DURING THE APARTHEID: A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF NADINE GORDIMER'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

Nadine Gordimer's "Six Feet of the Country", and "City Lovers" exposes the strains of racial oppression in the midst of "apartheid" in South Africa. Gordimer shows the people of two communities, the black and the white, are estranged. The lands and resources of the black majority are captured by the white minority of Afrikaners but their own humanity is on stake. They cannot justify whatever they have got through the provision of laws. Their working conditions on farm give them a chance to interact but the white Afrikaners are asked to segregate from the black and remain at a distance. This research is qualitative in nature and uses the content analysis of the selected text, with an emphasis on the characteristics of "Appropriation" and "Subversion" projected in the theoretical framework of Postcolonialism. The study finds that the characters show dissatisfaction with this discriminatory practice but they do not find an opportunity to stand against it in 'Six Feet of the Country'. The characters show appropriation to the standards of the colonial Afrikaners and the black are pushed to the wall. This paper traces the impact of apartheid in the lives of the South African people and explores how the characters appropriate or subvert the prescribed behavior.

Key words: Apartheid, Subversion, Appropriation, Postcolonialism

1. Introduction

The fiction of Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) earns her a unique status of anti-apartheid Afrikaner who does not stand by the oppression of her own community. She stands by the wider majority of Bantus (the Black) and other suppressed clans of South Africa. Her writings are a protest against injustice of apartheid and her fiction exposes the dehumanizing impact of apartheid on both the black and the white communities of South Africa. She is one of those writers who prophesied the abolition of apartheid in her fiction such as *July's People*. In her short stories, human interaction beyond the prescriptions of institutional power proves a form of inclusion and it resists the dominance of colonizer or settler and his politics of segregation. She asserts that right and wrong cannot be justified on the racial or communal distinctions. She challenges racial dichotomies and shows that no race is inherent evil. The socio-political initiatives like the apartheid give someone advantageous position. Gordimer's novels like *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* blur the distinctions between the colonizer and the colonized, depicting complex relationships and moral dilemmas within individuals caught in the web of apartheid. She gives voice to Black characters often silenced in mainstream narratives, exploring their experiences of resistance, resilience, and self-determination.

Six Feet of the Country is a collection of short stories which contains seven short stories including the title story. These stories are in the locale of Johannesburg and depict different

dimensions of the intercommunal relationship of the white Afrikaners and the black. These realistic short stories explore the dynamics of race and power in South Africa, both during apartheid and earlier colonial periods. The characters navigate the limitations imposed by racial and social norms especially the characters who belong to the black community experience loss which shapes their identity.

Six Feet of the Country is a story, told by an Afrikaner narrator and main character about the suffering of Petrus's family. Petrus' brother, an illegal immigrant from Rhodesia, reaches their farm and dies there. During postmortem, his body is swapped and it does not matter much to the narrator because he thinks that the dead is useless for these black farmworkers. But the workers believe that the proper burial is the right of the dead. They collect twenty pounds, an amount greater than three years income of a farm worker, and ask the narrator to get the body for burial. The health department sends coffin of someone else and during the funeral rites, the father realizes that this dead body is not of his son. The other workers also support him. They wait for a few days but no solution is provided to them. Finally, this old man (Petrus' father) is ready to go back to Rhodesia, Lericé, the narrator's wife, gifts him an old suit of her father and he returns.

City Lovers is a story of a geologist Dr Franz-Josef von Leinsdorf and a cashier girl of a departmental store. Leinsdorf is of Austrian origin while the girl is the black. He is unmarried and lives in a furnished flat and is mostly preoccupied with his research about mining and underground watercourses. He visits the store to buy his daily needs or meal and gets acquainted with the colored cashier girl. Their intimacy develops and he gives her the key of his flat where she can drop his ordered items. After sometimes, she starts learning English and becomes typist of Leinsdorf. Her stay at his flat gets longer and longer even she starts spending nights with him. They have physical relation. That is the time of apartheid, the white and the black were not allowed to intermix. One day, the police sergeant with his two assistants raids their flat and arrests the girl and Leinsdorf but he is bailed out the next day. He denies to have any intention to marry her. Since their physical relationship is not proved in the court, they are released. The girl's mother warns that she should not work as white man's assistant.

These two stories show how human relations are affected by the politics of the time. The human relations are target of appropriation but at personal level they are subverted. Human relations are not mechanical as they are assumed in prescribed norms of authoritative powers and their strategies of control. This paper contends that the politics of segregation such as apartheid tries to control human relationships but at personal level they do exist as they were once planned.

1.1 Research Gap

Nadine Gordimer's fiction, her style of narration and her protest against racial oppression, documenting an effort to win back self-awareness amidst apartheid. Much of the literary works have been done on Gordimer's "Six Feet of the Country", exploring the concepts of exile, sexual relationship of men and women, moral tensions and sanctioned racial oppression of black community by the Government. The researcher identifies the prospect to conduct the study of the selected text through the lens of appropriation and subversion. So, the present study aims and proposes the analysis of the two stories, "Six Feet of the Country", and "City Lovers" using the postcolonial concepts of appropriation and subversion.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does the apartheid control human relationship especially interracial relationship in Gordimer's "Six Feet of the Country", and "City Lovers"?
2. How are the responses of appropriation and subversion connected with apartheid in Gordimer's "Six Feet of the Country", and "City Lovers"?

2. Theoretical Framework

In postcolonial theory, the term of appropriation refers to the colonized people's efforts to meet the colonial criteria or standards to show their love for their taste of arts, culture and language. They try to follow the prescribed standards of cultural forms or rational thinking patterns. Cultural appropriation is the inappropriate or unacknowledged adoption of elements or practices from another culture which includes objects, customs, traditions and expressions. The power dynamics of two cultures play a crucial role in this regard. The imitation of other culture can be because of cultural hegemony, the desire of mimicry, and disrespect and stereotyping of others. On the other hand, the subversion refers to strategies employed by formerly colonized people and communities to undermine, disrupt, and ultimately dismantle the power structures and ideologies imposed by colonial systems. These structures and ideologies can encompass political, economic, social, and cultural domains. Subversion is not simply passive resistance; it actively rewrites and reinterprets narratives, values, and knowledge systems imposed by colonialism, paving the way for alternative expressions of identity and agency. Subversion can take many forms, including literary and artistic expression, political activism, religious and spiritual practices, reinterpretation of histories and myths, everyday acts of resistance like language use and cultural practices. Subversive practices often dismantle binary classifications created by colonialism, such as colonizer/colonized, civilized/savage, developed/underdeveloped. Instead, they emphasize hybridity, fluidity, and multiple perspectives. Subversion seeks to give voice and agency to marginalized groups whose narratives and experiences were silenced or distorted under colonialism. This includes groups like women, indigenous populations, and lower classes. Subversive strategies can involve borrowing from colonial languages, forms, and institutions, but reusing them in ways that subvert their original meaning and purpose. This re-appropriation disrupts the power dynamics and challenges colonial authority.

3. Literature Review

Dr B. Sudha Sai and Srinivas Abburi in their article, "Hostile World of the Oppressors and the Oppressed in Select Short Stories of Nadine Gordimer" capture the inner struggle of the characters in the context of Apartheid. They discuss five short stories which include 'Is there Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet', 'The Train from Rhodesia', 'The Soldier's Embrace', 'Which New Era Would That Be' and 'Six Feet of the Country'. The central theme of each story is discussed and then their common points are traced. While commenting on the story, Six Feet of the Country, the writers claim that patriarchal attitude indirectly supports apartheid and they claim that the marriage of the narrator and Learice had a problem because of their differences on the idea of equality. They conclude that these short stories reflect Gordimer's love her homeland

and its people. The short story writer presents the power to overcome the pain of violence and this redemptive power is humanity.

Stephen Clingman, an expert of Nadine Gordimer's fiction, in his article, "Gordimer, Interrupted" claims that Gordimer's sixth novel, *A Guest of Honour* (1971) marks a distinctive stage in her writing career because enriches her notion of realist novel by absorbing the theorists which she was reading in those days. He mentions that the studies of Gordimer's styles and form have focused on the two key points, 'the fragmented and disrupted' and explained either fragmentation as a part of disruption or opposition of realism or both. Then he claims that interruption has been implicitly or explicitly a distinct feature of Gordimer's style of writing and interruption is the stuff of all her fiction. He discusses her earlier and present works to justify his observation. Besides the novels, he has discussed short stories too. About the short story, *Six Feet of the Country*, Clingman writes that irony prevails in this story where the narrator, a white farm owner, is irritated and his irritation is revealed through his narration. The narrator who is fallible and feels that his wife Leric and his worker Petrus keep an eye on him. He imagines that they are on the same side. Clingman sees here the geometry of triangulation through the perspectives of narrator, Leric and Petrus and this perspective is polarized by the perspective of Petrus' father. Clingman concludes his article that Gordimer's writing will always be seen "through the interruptions of new perceptions, new forms, new enquiries" (22).

Pascale Tollance's article "[S]he Has a Knife in [Her] Hand: Writing/Cutting in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories" draws an analogy of cutting a small portion and leaving the larger behind from the short story, *Spoils*, where Siza, a black man and a guide of white group during a safari, cuts dexterously a small portion of meat and leaves the larger part for the lion. This analogy gives a self-reflexive dimension to the short story. It seems an example of synecdoche which is the "mother-figure" in a short story. Gordimer's short stories shape themselves around a hole and the power of her narrative lies in the break or its effect seen through discontinuity or interruption. The similar structure can be seen in "Six Feet of the Country" where an empty grave echoes the missing body of the deceased immigrant whose corpse was lost during autopsy and the issue remains unresolved till end. The story is left at this point which cannot be resolved and it looks like a violent interruption where the story ends abruptly. In this story, "Gordimer drills holes into the dream of owning a farm – a quintessential South African dream. The body whose fate falls to the white male narrator is not a missile that suddenly blows to bits his ordered life but a burden he does not know how to carry, a corpse that can neither be retrieved nor got rid of" (27). Since the dynamics of a short story depend on its last lines, Gordimer uses this space for her 'cutting' dexterity. The ending of 'Six Feet of the Country' shows how anxiously the white man craves for a resolution which is not available. This analogy of 'cutting'/writing is also seen in other stories such as 'City Lovers' and 'Country Lovers'. The ending of these stories is brutal where the brutal officers break into the houses to tear the couples apart because the couples do not belong to the same race. The ending of story is also an end of relation that came into scene in spite of the restrictions of law but the racial prejudice comes on surface and the relation of love turns into a rape. Tollance concludes that the ending of the story, 'Spoils', is also an example of metafiction because of its self-reflexivity.

Lilian Leouvel's article "Nadine Gordimer's Strangely Uncanny Realistic Stories: The Chaos and the Mystery of It All" shows the multilayers of Gordimer's short stories. Short story seems to Gordimer an ideal form to write about a moment that may produce a close-up effect and can transmit it to the reader in a faster mode. It has the ability to capture the ultimate reality in a brief illuminating moment. There is a visual image that conveys the "ultimate reality" and the writer makes experimentation with this image which appears like a photographic image in "Jump" and "Amnesty", or the visual translates reality into vision through its description in "Livingstone's Companions", or it becomes a symbolic image in the short story "Six Feet of the Country" and the novel, *The Conservationist*. Gordimer is a realist writer and her stories are mostly anchored in contemporary time and place but her some stories verge on the uncanny and look floating in allegorical world.

Michelle Goins –Reed's research article "Conflicting Spaces: Gender, Race, and Communal Spheres in Nadine Gordimer's Fiction" finds intersection of history, race and gender in Gordimer's fiction. She shows her fiction responds to class and gender which at surface, do not seem the primary focus of the author. She also finds how Gordimer's characters struggle with societal expectations while looking for their own identity. According to her, Gordimer's fiction does not offer mere narratives on gender or race. It is rather a dialogue between the fiction and the 'absent future' and her concerns for gender and class are also conveyed in the same manner.

Morteza Babaei and Fatemeh Pourjafari in their paper, "Living in Subalternity: The Voiceless Others in Nadine Gordimer's Selected Short Stories" discuss selected short stories of Nadine Gordimer "Six Feet of the Country", "Which New Era Would That Be", and two part story "Town and Country Lovers" in the light of subaltern and subalternity, the concepts of Postcolonial theory. They refer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as a major theorist of subalternity. Gordimer, a leading figure in anti-apartheid literature, is a South African writer and her stories rely on the events taking place in apartheid politics of South Africa. They show how black characters of Gordimer's stories become subaltern and women are double subalterns for their lower position and exploited beings. The researchers show that Gordimer's characters are victim of oppression, prejudiced legislation and gender inequality so Spivak's ideas can explain their fate better. Spivak describes such people as others or inferiors as they cannot control their lives or exercise their will and they are known as subalterns. The selected short stories illustrate that the characters in Gordimer's short stories are living in subalternity because they have no voice and their lives are influenced the colonizer's culture, language and behavior.

Gulab Sing and Divija Kumari in their article, "Discriminated Even in Death: Blacks in Nadine Gordimer's "Six Feet of the Country"", discuss maltreatment of the black and effects of the discriminatory laws such as the Group Areas Act in the lives of the illegal immigrants. The article shows how the South African politics discriminates the citizens and how this politics creates problems in the lives of the black. It shows the poverty and misery of the black who cannot afford the burial expenses but their urge to die gracefully motivate them to contribute and arrange the burial of the dead. The story serves as an instrument to draw a contrast of the culture of the white and the black and their respective priorities.

Dorothy Driver in her research article, "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicization of Women" traces the dilemma of a white writer who wants to oppose and subvert the ideology of white

supremacy. She claims that Gordimer has experienced this extraordinary difficulty of subverting the dominant ideology and her literary works strive to liberate her from her own white consciousness. She has made efforts of freeing white consciousness from the colonial trap because this trap turns the whites into the capitalist exploiters, landlords and employers and they have to share the burden of being perpetrators of apartheid. She does not want to be the part of inhuman colonialism. The critics who study her works and biography side by side, like to identify her novels and short story collections as specific stages which marks the stages of the social psychology of a white South African. As a South African writer she moves from the stage of uneasy liberalism to that of the marginality of liberalism. Then the inherent hypocrisies of liberalism are exposed to her and develops a 'revolutionary' attitude to transcend white cultural and political domination. She links the issue of gender inequality with the racist politics of the country. She employs sexuality as a concept as well as a device. She is different from those feminists who criticize 'feminine' but she voices for women empowerment. She analyzes the colonial domination in sexual terms and female imagery is drawn in parallel to the landscape. 'Six Feet of the Country' also shows a common bond of the women and the black and that is their exploitation.

Michael King's thesis, "A Study of the Development of the Structures and Themes in the Short Stories of Nadine Gordimer" makes a close reading of Gordimer's short stories keeping in view the contemporary expectations from a short story in terms of styles and innovative themes. King claims that Gordimer's early stories can be distinguished from her later fiction on the basis of her focus on racial differences in her contemporary society and a journey of characters from illusions to disillusion. Her later stories are more concerned with the position of women in society and the ideas of betrayal. He tells that usually Gordimer's story begins with some background information that sets its mood and atmosphere. Gradually the It moves into a high focus where a number of revelations occur and these revelations produce suspense and then a unifying revelation which is the essence of the story, concludes the story. She uses critical realism as a vehicle for the expression of her perceptions of contemporary South African society.

4. Analysis & Discussions

Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) is one of those writers who transcend their ethnic association and voice for justice and social inclusion. Born as a white Afrikaner, she had a baggage of apartheid, a systematic racial segregation of the white Afrikaners and the black Bantu population. After the Boer war, the English who defeated the Dutch became the rulers and the colonial history of oppressing the natives were seen through the Natives Land Act of 1913 and its subsequent laws which deprived the native population of their land and the Afrikaners (the races of European origin) became the land owners. Probably the worst time of apartheid was the tenure of the National Party which intensified its legacy of segregation through Coloured Persons Education Act (1953), The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), The Immorality Amendment Act (1950), The Population Registration Act (1950), The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953), The Group Areas Act (1950), and Native Labor Act (1953). The Bantus were forced to have a passbook that controlled their mobility. After a long struggle against it, Apartheid was abolished in 1994 by Nelson Mandela led government of African National Congress Party.

The apartheid controlled human relationship especially interracial relationship through so called Immorality Act of 1927 which banned the sexual relationship between the white owners of the farms and their black workers but in its amended act it was extended to the relationship of white and non-white and all colored groups were included in the list of non-white. The white control was not confined to the political and economic spheres, it was ensured in the social and cultural domains too. Geographically, they were also confined to the national boundaries drawn by the colonial masters. The neighboring country Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe) was also a colonial state in 1950s where the plight of the black population was similar to that of South Africa.

Gordimer's short stories, 'Six Feet of the Country' and 'City Lovers', reflect the misery of apartheid victims and the interracial relationship of the Afrikaners and the Bantus. 'Six Feet of the Country' presents the anguish of the guilty narrator who looks for the moral justification of his act of failing in bringing the corpse of the black boy from the health department of his country. He cannot determine where his role of accomplice in crime starts. He relates the story but his inner conflict remains unresolved. He wants to escape the charge that he is a culprit. He shares the ownership of a farm in the suburbs of Johannesburg though both man and wife are not farmers. His wife was an actress and he has investment in a travel agency but their dream of prosperity coincided with the dream of getting a farm that was easier for an Afrikaner couple in South Africa. He feels regret that they have got from this farm which they did not expect. His wife lost her delicacy and he was involved in an unwanted affair of dealing with the dead body of an illegal immigrant. This affair shatters his image before the black that white man can do whatever he wants to do. He feels helpless, humiliated and illogical. He can neither teach the black what he thinks is logical and appropriate nor he can arrange what they expect from him. He is a racist and sexist man who questions the capacity of others to have enthusiasms for something and their ability to get it. He did not like her wife's enthusiasms for acting and he does not like her enthusiasm for farming. Lerice is more frank and friendly with the black workers and their families. The narrator imagines their relation with the black workers in terms of feudal history but he does not get proper answer.

The major event of the story is the death of a black worker, Petrus' brother who has illegally come from a village of Rhodesia and reached this farm. The narrator faces a conflict of stand by the law or let the natives bury this dead boy. He chooses the path of a law abiding citizen and informs the police and health authorities who make autopsy of the corpse. The postmortem report confirms the cause of death of death which is pneumonia and his dead body is disposed of without any care of the bereft and their expectation for a burial. When the narrator shares it with Petrus, the latter asks him to get back the dead body for the burial of his brother as his father is on the way to Johannesburg for the burial rites. Petrus with the help of the black community arranges a huge amount of twenty pounds for it. Finally the dead body is received, and the funeral arrangements are made but when the old father carries the coffin he tells that it is not his son's because his thin and young "son was not so heavy" (17). They ask the narrator to get the exact corpse of Petrus' brother and he wrangles with the authorities for a week but the body is not found. Though he makes many assurances to Petrus but gradually it becomes clear that he cannot and the dead is deprived of the 'six feet'. The narrator and his wife even fail to get

back the money paid by the black for the dead body. His wife offers a cold comfort to the boy's father when he leaves for Rhodesia and gives him an old suit of her father.

Both the white and the black characters seem practicing cultural appropriation by endorsing the unjust and discriminatory laws. The narrator and his wife Lerice own a farm to materialize dream and they do not raise any question of getting farm where the black community is subjected to work as laborer while the white people can own a farm by the power of Natives Land Act and other laws. They check on their workers and try to practice the feudal-servant ethics but the paternal care of the feudal is missing in their relationship. They appropriate with the standards of intimating the police about a death but remain oblivious to the burial rights. They retain a segregation by keeping the black at length and feel nothing about their collection of money for the dead body. The narrator never thinks to give them a piece of land for a grave. Even when these poor people are swindled by the bureaucratic arrangement of health authorities, nobody fights for the rights of the black. He yields to the national authorities though he feels that his own image of powerful white man has been shattered. Lerice seems somehow concerned for the poor workers and shows sympathy for them but she does not stand against any authority. The subversion to authority is very dim and faint in the story. The boy who enters the territory of South Africa makes a subversive attempt that causes his cold on the way and then death. The black community does not complain to any white man and helps their fellow; it is another sign of desire to subvert but they are too poor to stand up against the colonial authority. The anguish of narrator and the title of the story are two devices of subversion which Nadine Gordimer has used to show irony of the situation. The title implies that during the apartheid, the black people were not in a position to bury their dead independently.

The third person narrator relates the story of the affair of Dr Franz-Josef von Leinsdorf with the colored girl and the impact of politics of the time in the personal relationship. Both the man and the woman belong to two different societies. Dr Leinsdorf is an Austrian geologist who is working on a project in South Africa and is least aware of the conditions of the colored people in this country while the poor girl is a cashier in a departmental store and imagines to come out of her poverty. A coincidence of telling Dr Leinsdorf about the blades packet leads to their contact which gradually becomes more personal and intimate. She does not resist when he admires her and calls her a 'good girl' and touches her. She falls in love with him and starts taking notice of his likes and dislikes especially in eating and drinking. She learns how to make coffee of his taste. They are involved in physical relation too though apparently she becomes his assistant and helps him in his notes. The girl confuses the professional relation with the personal ones. Their meetings of afternoon prolong to the late afternoons and then to evenings. Even once she has to invent an excuse for her mother to spend a night there. On Sundays they have picnics in the Magaliesberg and he teaches her how to swim. Their intimacy is very like husband and wife as the narrator tells, "He made his way into her body without speaking; she made him welcome without a word" (55). He buys a watch for her as a Christmas gift. Then the police raid and the sergeant tells that he has been watching this flat for three months and there is a colored girl in the flat. Dr Leinsdorf tries to conceal the truth but fails. The police makes a thorough search and arrests both of them. They are charged of contravening the Immorality Act in Johannesburg flat on the night of December 19. Though she admits their relationship in a statement, Dr Leinsdorf betrays her and negates any relation with her and with the aid of lawyer



arranges the bail of the girl too but their relation is destroyed. Her mother warns her to work for any white man.

The girl tries to subvert the restricted relationship of white and non-white. She transgresses her limits and enters the prohibited zone. Her Austrian partner also indulges in it and breaks the norms but he prefers convenience and complacency. He enjoys this relationship but he turns it into prostitution when he has to speak for the relationship in the court. Definitely, the discriminatory law of the Immorality Act does not belong to the country of his origin but probably the racial prejudices prevail there. His education and exposure do not change his prejudice. He can use a black girl as a prostitute but he cannot declare his love for her. The journey of both the characters remains different. The girl is gradually involved in this relationship but to the geologist the relationship remains a mechanical interaction which can be abolished any moment. He tries to appropriate his behavior with the norms of decency and exclusion and owns his family status. He endorses publicly those discriminatory laws of apartheid which he has violated in reality.

The apartheid segregates the people on the racial grounds and the laws intervenes in the very personal matters of the people. It creates certain expectations of behavior and the people through their responses come up to these expectations or resist those expectations. The people's responses can be of appropriation or subversion but both are connected with apartheid. In the story of 'Six Feet of the Country' the characters find little escape and show least courage to subvert the prescribed laws of apartheid state. The writer makes courage to defy these laws and introduces the reader an agony of the narrator who is searching for some solace. In the story of 'City Lovers' the girl transgresses her limits and her act proves a subversive attempt against the Immorality Act but her lover does not stand by her and her effort fails to produce results.

5. Conclusion

In short, Gordimer's stories, 'Six Feet of the Country' and 'City Lovers' show the suffering of the Bantu during the apartheid. The characters show dissatisfaction with this discriminatory practice but they do not find an opportunity to stand against it in 'Six Feet of the Country'. The characters show appropriation to the standards of the colonial Afrikaners and the black are pushed to the wall. The white owner of the farm also cause this appropriation though they feel guilty at heart. 'City Lovers' also looks for an opportunity to challenge the Immorality Act but when the colored girl admits her relationship with the white man denies it and betrays his love.

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