
LITERATURE AND LIFE: THE DECLINE AND FALL OF APARTHEID IN NADINE GORDIMER'S FICTION

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Gordimer is one of the renowned writers whose fiction consistently demonstrates the direct relationship between literature and life, art and society, imagination and reality. This relationship derives from the fact that, since she started writing over five decades ago, the author has mainly based her novels and short stories on life in her native South Africa. In her view, the "writer is the creative consciousness of [his] society" and as such, he draws on the life around him.¹ And in South Africa, all areas of life were influenced by "the politics of race"² during the apartheid era.

In her imaginative rendering of South African society, Gordimer has depicted the various stages of the apartheid system from its introduction in the late forties and fifties; entrenchment in the sixties and seventies; gradual decline in the eighties; to its ultimate fall in the nineties.

In this paper I intend to focus on Nadine Gordimer's depiction of the decline and fall of apartheid in selected works published in the eighties and early nineties. And my argument is that while demonstrating the close relationship between literature and life in these works, the author also performs the role of prophet. Through a sensitive reading and interpretation of prevailing social and political trends in her society, Gordimer was able to foretell the collapse of the apartheid system long before that apocalyptic idea was accepted by the white regime in South Africa.

Nadine Gordimer first depicts the decline and fall of apartheid in *July's People*, a novel published in 1981. While she sets the story in an imaginary future in which apartheid has already collapsed, and South Africa is rocked by civil war, she places the situation against a realistic background of the social and industrial unrest that pervaded the country in the early eighties.

The author begins the novel with an ironic scene in which a black servant, July, serves tea to a white family, the Smales; July has given refuge to the Smales in his village after helping them to flee the urban areas of the country where most of the fighting is concentrated. After presenting a brief description of the white family's flight to July's village, Gordimer narrates events in the immediate past which culminated into the current full-scale civil war:

It began prosaically wierdly. The strikes of 1980 had dragged on, one inspired or brought about by solidarity with another until the walk out and the shut-down were lived as contiguous and continuous phenomena rather than industrial chaos. While the government continued to compose concessions to the black trade unions exquisitely worded to conceal exactly concomitant restrictions, the black workers concerned went hungry, angry, and workless anyway, and the shopfloor was often all that was left of burned-out factories. For a long time, no one had really known what was happening outside the area to which his own eyes were witness. Riots, arson, occupation of the headquarters of international corporations, bombs in public buildings -- the censorship of newspapers, radio and television left rumour and word-of-mouth as the only source of information about this chronic state of uprising all over the country.³

This "chronic state of uprising all over" South Africa is confirmed as a historical fact of the eighties by Stephen Clingman, editor of Gordimer's collection of essays entitled The Essential Gesture (1988). Clingman makes this confirmation in his introduction to one of the essays, "Living in the Interregnum", which Gordimer presented at New York University Institute of the Humanities in October, 1982. Significantly enough, Clingman refers to July's People and its revolutionary context in the introduction:

By the 1980's South African fiction began to be preoccupied with thoughts of revolution in South Africa; Gordimer's eighth novel, July's people (1981) was set at a future moment of revolution itself. There were perhaps good reasons for this overall concern. By this time South Africa's neighbouring countries, Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe, had won their independence. Inside the country the Soweto Revolt had been quelled, but it had initiated a longer-term period of political up-swing. By the 1980's an independent black trade-union movement was gathering in numbers and strength. There was also renewed organisation against apartheid, both at the local level and on a broader national basis: within a year of the essay ["Living in the Interregnum"] ... the United Democratic Front had been established, the first such mass movement, legal and active above ground, since the banning of the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress in 1960.⁴

This resurgent anti-apartheid activity never relented until, in 1990, the white government capitulated by unbanning the A.N.C., P.A.C. and other hitherto prohibited political organisations; releasing their long-imprisoned leaders; and initiating negotiations on the abolition of apartheid and establishment of a non-racial political order in South Africa.

The novel in which Gordimer exclusively focusses on the "renewed organisation against apartheid" in the 1980's is My Son's Story, published in 1990. She depicts the political struggle in this work through the life of the central character, Sonny, a coloured by race. She uses two narrative voices in the story. One voice is a monologue by Sonny's adolescent son, Will; the other is Gordimer's own authorial narration of the story. These voices are so skilfully interlaced that they draw a comprehensive and complex portrait of Sonny. While Will's monologue opens the novel, but focusses on a later stage in Sonny's life, Gordimer's authorial voice weaves in and out describing all the stages of the hero's experiences from an early time when he had no political awareness to the latest period in which he is a full-time political activist.

During the early part of Sonny's life rigid apartheid is shown to be still in place. The different races live in segregated areas as decreed by the Group Areas Act of 1950.⁵ From his coloured location in Benoni, Sonny initially sees himself as different from the ghetto-confined Africans, whom he calls the "real" blacks. In this way he subscribes to the government categorization of people by race under the Population Registration Act of 1950.⁶ Yet, in spite of being different from the "real" blacks, Sonny finds himself cut off from all the intellectual, social, and political opportunities available to his white half-brothers.

For some time, the hero is plagued by a nagging sense of personal inadequacy without understanding the political roots of the problem. It is only later, when he awakens to his identity with the Africans and their cause for freedom that Sonny understands his own position. He comes to recognize his affinity to the Africans upon realising that, like them, he is denied freedom in virtually every aspect of his life by the same white establishment.

Curiously enough, Sonny's physical manifestation of his newly attained political awareness is catalysed by the political defiance of pupils at the segregated school for coloureds where he teaches. These school children surprise everyone in the coloured community by boycotting classes in solidarity with black pupils who, reminiscent of the 1976 Soweto uprising, reject their inferior education all over the townships. Unlike his fellow teachers and other elders, Sonny supports the pupils and accompanies them on a "march across the veld [into the black locations] to show their solidarity with the children who had been locked out of their school by the police after a boycott of classes; black solidarity"⁷

This march marks the beginning of Sonny's political activism. Through this march, Sonny exposes himself to other activists in the country, and to the ever watchful security police of the apartheid state. For a photograph showing him with the children on the march appears in one of the papers. Consequently, he is invited to participate in other anti-apartheid activities such as campaigns against removals of non-white people from designated white areas, one of the most notorious policies of Pretoria in the apartheid era. The security police, on the other hand, begin to watch him as a dissident.

In due course, Sonny moves up politically. From functioning as only a member of the Committee Against Removals, he rises to the level of a regular speaker for

what is simply referred to as "the movement". Throughout the story, Gordimer never identifies "the movement" directly. But she gradually makes it evident that this movement is a clandestine internal wing of the A.N.C. for its top leadership is in Lusaka.

As Sonny carries on his political work in his new capacity, the author reports his dismissal from his regular job as a teacher. "The education department responsible for people of their kind had informed the Principal that this teacher was to be dismissed" (p.33). This dismissal becomes the turning point in Sonny's life, for not only does it impel him towards full-time political activism, but leads to the destabilization of his family. It is in this phase of the hero's life that the author depicts the steady decline of apartheid.

Nadine Gordimer presents this part of the story with the sense of irony which characterizes all her works. Apart from performing the role of ironist herself, she uses the hero's son, Will, as the main internal ironic observer. There are two primary subjects of ironic contradiction, namely, Sonny himself and the white government. Through his political activism, Sonny initiates the destabilization and eventual destruction of his own family. And while the white government begins to dismantle apartheid by introducing political reforms, it ruthlessly defends the system by continuing to harass, kill, detain and imprison anti-apartheid activists.

On the immediate effects of Sonny's dismissal from the teaching profession on his family, Will observes:

They found a job for him in an Indian wholesaler's - the people of the committee against removals which was now his community work, taking him all over the place, speaking on platforms and attending meetings outside the community of our streets, our area. He no longer had a profession; his profession had become the meetings, the speeches, the campaigns, the delegations to the authorities. The job - book-keeping or something of that kind he quickly taught himself - was not like teaching; it was a necessity that fed us and that was got through between taking the train to the city every morning and returning every evening. It had no place in our life. He did not bring it home, it was not present with us in the house as his being a teacher always had been. (pp. 35-36)

After some time, the family suffers further dislocation when the committee decides that Sonny and his family move to Johannesburg. This move, Sonny explains to his wary wife, Aila, has been decided upon for political reasons. They are to move into a house in a white area in defiance of the Group Areas Act. When Aila observes that it is illegal to "own a house in a white area", Sonny responds: "That's the idea. We don't accept their segregation, we've had enough of telling them, we're showing them" (p.41). In other words, illegally moving in among whites is a new tactic of political resistance. The fact that such a tactic is practicable is an early indication of the decline of apartheid in the eighties.

Sonny and his family live in the white Johannesburg neighbourhood for some time without any official action taken against them. Their house is only burnt down by white extremists towards the end of the novel. These extremists signify the rise of hardcore racist elements operating outside the formal apartheid structure in South Africa during the same period of reforms.

Shortly after moving to Johannesburg, Sonny becomes completely involved in anti-apartheid activities, and in due course, the inevitable happens: he is arrested, detained, tried for subversion and imprisoned.

While he is in detention, Sonny reflects on the black people's fight for freedom, and his political commitment intensifies:

He knew he was on his way to prison from the days back in the coloured location of his home-town on the Reef when he had led his pupils across the veld to the black location - as he still called those places, then. Or if he didn't know it, he should have; he realized this as, instinctively taking up one form of political action after another, he understood that the mystery of the meaning of life he and Aila had vaguely known to be contained in living useful lives was no mystery. For them, their kind, black like the others, there was only one meaning: the political struggle.(p. 47)

With this intensified political awareness, Sonny experiences a breakdown in communication with his wife, Aila, when she visits him in detention. This is because Aila, to him, appears to represent the humble orderliness of their old family life in

the coloured location. She also seems to symbolize the kind of domestic security that is incompatible with his type of political commitment; a commitment that is always fraught with danger. Having accepted the ever-present reality of danger in his work and rejected his family's previous life of racial subservience, Sonny sees Aila as having been left politically behind.

Gordimer juxtaposes Sonny's feelings of alienation from his wife with an unexpected sense of identification he experiences in relation to Hannah Plowman, a white woman working for a human rights organization, who also comes to see him in detention. Sonny is shown to be immediately attracted to this woman's political sophistication, which enables him to engage in deep communication with her on a wide range of sensitive issues prohibited for discussion in a jail environment. This experience exacerbates Sonny's feelings of estrangement from his "simple" wife.

When he is later tried and imprisoned, Hannah writes him a letter which he values more, for its obliquely presented political information, than Aila's letters which dwell on uninspiring family matters. After he gets out of prison, Sonny regularly meets Hannah in various political gatherings; a close friendship develops between them, and eventually they become lovers.

Through this love affair, Sonny destroys his family directly. Because of the intellectual and emotional happiness he gets from his relationship with Hannah, Sonny neglects his family. The son, Will, becomes a disillusioned passive observer of his father's estrangement from the family. Psychological and emotional frustration caused by Sonny's infidelity drive both his wife, Aila, and daughter, Baby to seek personal meaning in revolutionary politics. They join the military wing of the A.N.C., Umkonto we Sizwe, and go to live in exile in Lusaka. The tragic irony of it all is that while Sonny wilfully destroys his family in pursuit of self-gratification, in his public life, he courageously carries on the fight for the freedom of all oppressed South Africans.

Gordimer refers to the apartheid reforms of the eighties, which signified the decline of the system, mainly in connection with Sonny's love life. Her depiction of his political activities almost always highlights the continued struggle. One of the most significant reforms of the period was the removal of the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 which prohibited sexual relationships between people of different races.⁶ That is why Sonny and Hannah are able to have a love affair without fear of

the apartheid authorities. Along with the repealing of the Immorality Amendment Act, other laws pertaining to colour restrictions in various areas of life were also removed. In the novel, soon after Sonny's release from prison, the author reports that he is able to have coffee with Hannah openly, for coffee bars were now open to all races. She reports the change from Sonny's incredulous point of view:

It was possible - to take one's dark face into a coffee bar. And with a white woman companion; to pull out her chair for her and sit opposite her. It had been possible for some time, although, coming from a small town where such barriers fell more slowly if at all, and after two years in a segregated prison, Sonny still had a strange feeling: that he was not really there, a commonplace meeting of this kind was not happening to him.(pp. 63-64)

In the opening scene of the novel where Will meets his father and Hannah coming out of a movie theatre, the boy states in his monologue that "Cinemas had been open to us only a year or so" (p.3)

In the course of the romance Sonny and Hannah go on a number of weekend outings. On such occasions they are able to book themselves as a married couple into hotels without any problems for "the old restrictions of colour were abolished in most hotels and resorts" (p.74). The author adds that "once [Sonny and Hannah] spent two days of [the new] kind of freedom somewhere in the Eastern Transvaal, and even stood among white Sunday families withgrannies and squealing children, watching the young hatch on a crocodile farm". (p.74). At another point, Will reports the desegregation of some of the country's beaches: "Some of the beaches are open to all of us now" (p.136), he says, as he describes his own vacation at an all-race beach somewhere in Durban.

On another weekend outing, Sonny tells Hannah about how, when he was a teacher, he and his pupils were denied a ride on a train for whites only when it was raining heavily. But now "trains on [that same] route were no longer segregated" just as "there was no law, any longer, against a man of his kind and a woman of her kind sharing a bed" (p.210).

However, when Gordimer focusses on Sonny's political life, another contradictory reality emerges: the white government continues to persecute anti-apartheid activists. In one chilling episode, the author depicts the brutal dispersal of a multi-racial "cleansing of the graves" ceremony in a black township. The ceremony, at which Sonny is the main speaker, is in honour of nine young men who were killed by government forces. During the dispersal another young man is shot dead.

To compound the irony, while the government intensifies violence against its opponents at home, it turns a blind eye to various white groups in the country who engage in open contacts with the A.N.C. leadership in exile. Gordimer highlights the irony by contrasting the government's rejection of Sonny's application for a passport in order to go and see Aila and Baby in Lusaka with its tolerance of the white groups' politically-motivated trips to the same place:

Although Sonny had been refused a passport for the compassionate purpose of visiting his wife and daughter, others were making the trip across the frontier for openly political purposes. White industrialists, churchmen, academics, liberals and lawyers: they were people belonging to professional and social structures within the law, even if they now pressed official confidence in them by tentatively stepping beyond it. Most never had had, nor sought, any contact with the liberation movement within the country. The instinct of a ruling class to seek out what it hoped might be the discovery of something of their own kind beneath a different skin and a different rhetoric ignored the opportunities to do so at home and led them to go abroad to meet the movement's leaders in exile, instead.(p.267)

These contradictions reflect history itself. While the Botha government initiated political reforms, it was unwilling to dismantle apartheid completely. And in the late eighties various white groups really travelled to Lusaka to consult with the A.N.C. leadership on the country's future. These consultations, together with the half-hearted reforms the government effected, clearly pointed to the imminent fall of apartheid, in spite of the continued state violence against its opponents. Gordimer

underlines this violence by ending the novel with Sonny back in detention. And she does not intimate the initiatives of President F.W. de Klerk, made between 1989 and 1991, which unequivocally signified the fall of apartheid. But she foretold these initiatives years earlier in her 1987 novel, A Sport of Nature⁹. This is the novel in which Gordimer's role as prophet is conclusively demonstrated.

In all her works, the main subjects of the stories are people whose lives are influenced and determined by their social environments. The reader, therefore, extrapolates the political situation from the environments in which the characters are set. In A Sport of Nature, the plot focusses on the central character, a white girl called Hillela Capran. The story begins in the fifties when Hillela is a school girl, and ends at an unspecified time decades later when the heroine is a middle-aged woman. The narrative describes Hillela's experiences within South Africa and in other parts of the world from the fifties through the sixties, seventies, eighties, to the unspecified time in the future. In the process, the author refers to all the phases of apartheid during these decades, and concludes the novel with the establishment of black majority rule in South Africa. Although the author does not specify the year in which this historic event occurs, it is presumably some time in the nineties. Hillela, who is now wife of a president of an unnamed West African country, attends the independence celebrations which, to her, are the triumphant conclusion of a long hard struggle for freedom in South Africa; freedom for which her first husband, an A.N.C. official died in the late sixties. In her presentation of the celebrations, Gordimer implicitly depicts the A.N.C. as forming the first black government in the former white republic.

Between 1989 and 1994 political events in South Africa bore out much of what Gordimer prophesied in A Sport of Nature. As mentioned earlier, in 1990, the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress and other prohibited political organisations were unbanned; their leaders were released from prison; and the white government opened up negotiations with all opposition groups on the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. In June 1991, the main legal pillars of apartheid were removed; these are the Land Act (1913), the Group Areas Act (1950), and the Population Registration Act (1950). In 1993, an interim non-racial constitution was approved by the South African parliament. And on 7th December in the

same year, a Transitional Executive Council took office to oversee the political process leading to the all-race elections of April, 1994. And remarkably the results of the elections actualized Gordimer's prediction of an A.N.C. government in a post apartheid South Africa.

Admittedly, there are obvious differences of detail between the fictional events depicted by Gordimer in her novels and the historical ones that unfolded in South Africa from the eighties to the nineties. Nevertheless, what is crucial to Gordimer's role as artist-seer is that her main prediction of the fall of apartheid and installation of an A.N.C. government is now a reality. Through the use of her imagination, Gordimer was able to project, in A Sport of Nature, the collapse of apartheid and establishment of black majority rule in South Africa. But this imagination was informed by social and political trends in the real world. The endemic social unrest that plagued South Africa since the introduction of apartheid clearly pointed to the untenability of the system. This unrest was augmented by vehement political opposition to apartheid by various organisations both within and outside the country, over the decades. And the A.N.C. distinguished itself as the most popular and enduring of such organisations. This opposition was inevitable because of the very nature of apartheid as an unnatural and unjust system; a system that fundamentally violated the natural human rights of justice and freedom.

While the relentless opposition indicated the untenability of apartheid, the political reforms of the eighties were the clearest official indicators of the system's irrevocable movement towards complete collapse. Therefore, by sensitively observing these prognostic trends, Gordimer was able to foresee and artistically project the logical conclusion of the political process, namely, the total dismantling of apartheid and establishment of a just social order in South Africa.

Footnotes

- 1 Nadine Gordimer, "Literature and Politics in South Africa," Southern Review, Vol. vii, No.3 (November, 1974), p. 219.
- 2 Ibid, pp. 205-206

- 3 Nadine Gordimer, July's People (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1982), pp. 6-7. First Published in Britain by Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1981.
- 4 Stephen Clingman, Introduction to Nadine Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum," in The Essential Gesture ed. Stephen Clingman, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1989), p. 261. First published in Britain by Jonathan Cape, 1988.
- 5 This information is borrowed from Hilda Kuper, "Commitment: The Liberal as Scholar in South Africa", in The Liberal Dilemma in South Africa, ed. Pierre L. Van den Berghe (New York: St. Martins Press, 1979), p. 31.
- 6 Loc. cit.
- 7 Nadine Gordimer, My Son's Story (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1991). p. 27. First Published in Britain by Bloomsbury 1990.
- 8 Kuper, op. cit. p. 31.
- 9 A Sport of Nature is discussed in some detail in Brighton J. Uledi-Kamanga, "Social Responsibility Through Art: The Case of Nadine Gordimer and South Africa", A paper presented at the Research and Publications Committee Conference, Chancellor College, Zomba, April, 1993.