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Negotiating a Life: The Many Face(s) of Social Identity in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*

Manjari Shukla*

Abstract: *Burger's Daughter* (1979) is a historical and political novel by the South African Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer. Set in South Africa of the mid-1970s, it narrates the life of Rosa, the protagonist, as she comes to terms with her father Lionel Burger's legacy as an activist in the South African Communist Party. The narrative oscillates back and forth between Rosa's internal monologue and the omniscient narrator and voices the history of anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa portraying some real events and people including Nelson Mandela and the 1976 Soweto uprising. The narrative presents an ongoing conflict between the protagonist's assertion of an identity independent of her father's role as a political activist, and her ultimate realization of a life that is private and political both. The paper attempts to discuss and elaborate on the journey taken up by Rosa and how she ultimately redefines her identity amidst political and personal chaos.

Keywords: *Anti-apartheid struggle, I-identity, South African social-political system*

Burger's Daughter (1979) is a polyphonic text which foregrounds multiplicity of voices, and showcases the diversity of South African people caught amidst racial conflicts. Set in the South Africa of 1960s, the story begins with fourteen year old Rosa Burger who is the daughter of Lionel Burger, a protagonist figure in the South African Communist Party. Rosa, the protagonist of the novel, has different roles and relationships with each of them, which allows the readers to see how

they interact. It has been observed that the novel showcases a cyclical pattern of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis in Hegelian pattern. The first part which serves the function of thesis involves the ideas of Lionel Burger in synchronization with his attempts to fight for the equal rights. Rosa, the daughter of Mr. Burger, tries initially to imitate her father; she mingles with her father's friends but eventually gets disillusioned. Further, the novel presents the anti thesis wherein we observe Rosa's journey(s) to Europe. This is an exploratory phase in Rosa's life as she discovers her sensuality, her body largely shedding her moral inhibitions and inculcates the ability to care for another person. The last part of the text could be taken up as Synthesis wherein we examine the realization which dawns on Rosa. She gets to understand that she does in fact have obligations to care for people and continue the fight, but she combines and recreates her role as a South African by becoming a physiotherapist and promoting wellness of bodies.

The novel adeptly talks about the many face(s) of social identity and Rosa happens to depict this face with multiple angles and perceptions. The novelist has deliberately chosen the first person narrative style for Rosa's perspective. We observe that Rosa registers her emotions and conflicts through each stage of the journey and describes the events, images and meetings in her life with minutest details. She is seen questioning her own identity through numerous internal struggles which are voiced by the author through Rosa. The result is that we take up Rosa as she really is and not as someone's daughter or under any social garb. Throughout her writing, Rosa keeps coming back to images that become turning points in her life: "It's about suffering. How to end suffering? And it ends in suffering" (*Burger's Daughter* 332).

The novel is also a historical and cultural document both in its content and in its own history of censorship. As the epigraph to the novel suggests, Rosa's identity is both affirmed ('I am') as an individual and yet constructed as passive to locality ('the place in which something has occurred'). The novel focuses in particular on the events culminating in the Soweto revolt, as the leadership of the struggle against Apartheid passed from a coalition of mixed race, often Communist inspired activists to indigenous black leaders. In *Burger's Daughter*, the correspondence between fiction and history are close. The character of Lionel Burger is based to a large extent on Bram Fischer, a leader of the

South African Communist Party about whom Gordimer had written two articles.

Another dimension to Rosa's character is her connection with her lineage. She is presented by the novelist in such a way that it seems she has no individual distinct identity. From an early age to her maturity, she is always addressed or known as Lionel Burger's daughter and not Rosa. The Apartheid struggle is also evident in her character wherein we scrutinize that from a tender age, she learns to transmit messages secretly so that people remain unaware of her requirements from people she is closely associated with.

Burger's Daughter runs through almost every layer of a society on the eve of a social revolution. Rosa Burger, can see the development in individuals enter a new stage, and she has the privilege of being able to hear what many sorts of people expect and want from a mass movement. But Rosa remains an observer of and not a participant in the struggle. The Soweto Uprising changes her position, but not in a favorable way.

Drawn in this regard of her political positioning, Dorothy Driver in her article "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women" comments that sexuality is significant in Gordimer's fiction, both as a concept and as a device. Her general aim, to "speak first of sexuality as a concept, seems to be, to retain for women the right to be sexually attractive and vital beings, without being therefore classified as 'merely' feminine. While her views on sexuality are controversial, they should not be taken as simplistic or accidental" (36). The characterization taken up by the novelist is seen to highlight the physical aspects of the character, chiefly the protagonist. In the very first chapter of the text, there is the description of menstruation which is private and feminine. This is set up in stark contrast to the public and 'masculine' domain of politics surrounding the prison. The text portrays it in the following manner:

But real awareness is all focused in the lower part of my pelvis, in the leaden, dragging, wringing pain there. Can anyone describe the peculiar fierce concentration of the body's forces in the menstruation of early puberty? The bleeding began just after my father had made me go back to bed... outside the prison the internal landscape of the body turns me inside out in that public place on that public occasion... I am my womb, and a year ago I

wasn't aware – physically- I had one. (*Burger's Daughter* 15-16)

The South African social-political system of the novel's milieu comprises apartheid structures and organizations also, and it is against these, that the Burgers and their associates are fighting. The contrasting, political ideologies with which they are aligned are informed by the intimate human relationships between people, regardless of race. This means that while their actions are political, and their goals are social, their motivation for these actions and goals is personal and intimate. Part of Rosa's difficulty in adulthood is learning to live in the social-political order without the nuanced human relationships within which she has been raised.

Lauren Leigh O'Brien's observation in her dissertation on Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* is that

. . . while most children are introduced to the symbolic order during the oedipal phase, the experience of the protagonist is of a somatic, interconnected humanness which extends into her teens. She remains in a state of stasis in conception of herself, a state which continues to be formed oppositionally, as in the mirror phase, in which her subjectivity remains external to her. She thus preserves a working version of the Lacanian imaginary, partially isolated from the symbolic order. It is only after the death of her father that she begins to realise the uniqueness of her insulated experience under apartheid, which sought precisely to prevent human relationships being formed across racial boundaries. (19)

As a result, Rosa struggles to live in South Africa, and it is only by removing herself from a fraught political alignment that she can begin to determine her personal alignments. Rosa finds that the political ideologies she inherited from her parents are at loggerheads with her intimate experiences.

The struggle of the protagonist further highlights the idea of subjectivity as individual consciousness, freedom and responsibility which becomes problematic within a social context because what actually determines the individual being is not consciousness only, but the social and cultural world that shapes consciousness. O'Brien is apt to

remark that the initial constructions of subjectivity are thus performed as “spatial construction” (25). In South African context, the complexities inherent in the idea of autonomous subjectivity are further compounded by the diverse racial classifications of Apartheid and their repercussions on gender, sexuality and politics.

Gordimer has said of *Burger’s Daughter* that the theme came to her as a question: “What it is to be like a daughter of a hero, in a country where social strife still produces the hero figure” (*Burger’s Daughter* 17). This is the reason why the text is seen to be validating a kind of examination of the human conflict between the desires to live a personal, private life and at the same time poses a rival claim of social responsibility towards one’s fellow human being. Within this very context we find the female protagonist struggling with the universal dilemma and grappling with a place and her individual identity in it. Sakamoto in his article entitled “The Politics of Place and the Question of Subjectivity in Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*” observes that

the protagonist’s subjectivity is also explored within the contesting political ideologies of this period: the National party’s Apartheid ideology, the Black consciousness ideology, Lionel Burger’s Communism and South Africa’s Liberal humanism. Situated at the intersection of manifold ideologies and complex political stances and intersection of race and gender and sexuality there is multiply-positioned subject Rosa (261).

Sakamoto takes the novel to be an ambitious project of Gordimer, wherein as the story progresses it widens and increases the complexity of the protagonist’s dilemma by first revealing the reality of place and further, by exploring in a personal and subjective way the conflicting political, cultural and ideological realities that define the meaning of place in South African context.

Rosa’s conflictual personal and public relations encourage her to move away from her old self, defined by her parents’ political creed, towards a journey to explore one’s self. She travels to different spaces not only in South Africa but also to Europe and back to South Africa again. It is through the heroine’s multiple encounters with these spaces that Gordimer defines the South African experience as distinct from that of any other part of the world. Rosa recognizes the need and urgency for

a reevaluation of her father's political heritage. Through this journey, she explores her subject position(s). Throughout the process of development, it is seen that her process of interrogation is multi-voiced subverting the certainty of unified voice because in her world there is no consensus about social and moral values and she continually questions and negotiates with various moral and ideological positions.

In an interview to Jannika Hurwitt in *The Paris Review*, Gordimer remarked that, more than just a story about white communists in South Africa, *Burger's Daughter* is about 'commitment' and what she as a writer does to 'make sense of life'. After Mandela and Fischer were sentenced in the mid-1960s, Gordimer considered going into exile, but she changed her mind and later recalled "I wouldn't be accepted as I was here, even in the worst times and even though I'm white" (110). Just as Rosa struggles to find her place as a white in the anti-apartheid liberation movement, so did Gordimer. In an interview in 1980, she said that "when we have got beyond the apartheid situation—there's a tremendous problem for whites, unless whites are allowed in by blacks, and unless we can make out a case for our being accepted and we can forge a common culture together, whites are going to be marginal" (115).

While Gordimer is not a feminist author and *Burger's Daughter* is not a feminist novel, Gardner suggests in "*Still Waiting for the Great Feminist Novel*" that the book has "a discernible woman-concerned subtext", making it "impossible for feminists to dismiss or ignore" (183). She adds that the novel has a potential feminist awareness that is covered by more conventional patriarchal writing conventions. After the death of Rosa's mother, the statement "Already she had taken on her mother's role in the household, giving loving support to her father" (*Burger's Daughter* 224) illustrates the continuing hegemony of bourgeois-patriarchal ideology in the novel. This wide gulf between feminism (Rosa's liberation as a woman) and the struggle for justice in South Africa, is responsible for Rosa's struggle.

Gordimer herself describes *Burger's Daughter* as "a historical critique" (Gray 179), and a political novel, which explicates the effects of politics on human lives and, unlike a political tract, does not propagate an ideology. The text leaves us to think on many pertinent questions like "whose fight is it? Should a white man defend a black nation and call it his fight? Or should it be up to the oppressed to defend their own rights? What is the author's viewpoint in the writing of the book?"

While the narrative centers on Rosa's inner struggle and tensions, it also exposes the complex social and political context of South Africa in which radicalism has been defined racially. Gordimer's work observed the contradictions, shades of opinion and social types in South African society. She rejected the notion, espoused after the 1970s by supporters of the Black Consciousness movement that white writers could not adequately write about the lives of blacks. In fact, throughout her career, Gordimer wrote persuasively about lives of people along the whole social spectrum of South Africa. At times she provided an almost panoramic view of that society.

Sketching the social spectrum of South Africa, Robert Boyers rightly says in his article "Public and Private: On *Burger's Daughter*" that the novel is another study in consciousness, and demonstrates how such a work may at the same time be conceived as a political novel. "It shows, too, how the relation between public and private issues can be handled so as to privilege neither the one nor the other, though public issues are made to dominate the lives even of persons who think they've achieved a separate peace" (6-7). Most of all, it proves that a great novel, in seeking to accommodate various purposes, trying to be absolutely itself and like no other, doesn't deny the validity of its own generic limitations so much as it extends our sense of the relevant genre.

Although there is no solution provided at the end of the text, yet the novelist's concern seems to re-awaken white consciousness and to explore new paths for white South Africans and black/white relations. In order to negotiate the excessive racialization of the struggle and radical opposition, Gordimer deals with the issue and projects it through the negotiating self of Rosa. Exploring the possibilities of womanhood and sexuality we observe Rosa as a character, projecting the ideology of the novelist Gordimer.

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**Vasanta College for Women, Varanasi
manjarishuklabhu@gmail.com*