

# Power, Sex and Resistance in Gordimer's *Occasion for Loving*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the theme of apartheid and its resistance in Nadine Gordimer's novel *Occasion for Loving*. Through her fiction Gordimer has explored the possibility of resisting apartheid and envisioned a multiracial South Africa. She has explored in her writings the social and psychological relationships and how they are governed by race and sex. The paper argues that Gordimer has provided through her work an alternative discourse to resist apartheid. This essay discusses *Occasion for Loving* in the light of Michel Foucault. In his books, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* Foucault has given an account of the significant connections between power, knowledge, and the subject, which can be used to analyse the fiction of Gordimer. He argues that power is productive and that subjects are produced through cultural and institutional practices. He mainly focuses on practices of disciplinary power which lead to binary divisions such as sane/mad, and which can be used as a means of social control. Such practices of disciplinary power are found in apartheid South Africa. Like Foucault, Gordimer seems to consider sexuality as a site of power relations governed by the dominant socio-cultural conventions. She has attempted to produce an alternative discourse about sexuality in *Occasion for Loving* and suggested a resistance to apartheid ideology of South Africa.

**Keywords**— apartheid, Foucault, Gordimer, power, resistance, sexuality.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nadine Gordimer (1923–2014) has been a well known author who has received international attention for her imaginative records of the socio-political condition of the contemporary South Africa. With her artistic vision and unwavering social commitment, she has created a body of fiction that brought her the Nobel Prize for literature in 1991. She began her career when the National Party came to power in 1948 and institutionalized a policy of racial segregation known as apartheid. Every community or group of people considered non-European by the government was governed separately and subordinated at every level to white South Africans. Thus, for example, the Group Areas Act (1950) divided urban areas into separate blocks of black and white neighbourhoods. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Act

(1950) made sexual and marriage relations illegal across the races (Thompson 190). The apartheid policy became more oppressive in the 1960's and 70's. On the other hand, there had been protests against the unjust and brutal policies of apartheid culminating in the election of Nelson Mandela as the president of South Africa. Gordimer was intensely alert to these developments. In fact, there is a parallel between her literary career and the rise and fall of apartheid regime. Clingman argues that history is the conditioning force of her fiction (15). And the history of South Africa in the second half of twentieth century is the history of apartheid and its resistance. This is clearly visible in Gordimer's novels such as *Occasion for Loving*.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gordimer has received a lot of critical attention over the years. Most of the scholars have found her work as revealing a tension between the private and the public life, or as a fictional expression of the political or historical conditions of the time. In his 1974 book, *Nadine Gordimer*, Robert F. Haugh argues that Gordimer's talent lay in her short stories where she focuses on private relationships. Haugh believes that her interest in public issues leads her to writing novels, where she tries to combine the personal with the political. John Cooke's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/ Public Landscapes* (1985) deals with the theme of dichotomy between private and public life. He approaches Gordimer's fiction from the perspectives of landscapes on which her novels revolve. Michael Wade, on the other hand, analyses the fiction of Gordimer in the political and historical contexts. In his book, *Nadine Gordimer* (1978), Wade examines the development of Gordimer's political ideas, mainly through her novels. However, Stephen Clingman's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986) is considered as the most significant study on Gordimer as a novelist and thinker. Clingman traces Gordimer's developing consciousness of history through her novels. Contextualized in the political and intellectual developments of the time, the book offers a close analysis of the novels. Clingman locates the process of historical change in the lives of Gordimer's characters and presents a view of 'history from inside'. Clingman also edited a selection of Gordimer's essays titled *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. His introductions to the essays usefully situate the essays in their historical context. Dominic Head's *Nadine Gordimer* (1994) offers a comprehensive study of the novels of Gordimer. Instead of considering only the political and historical dimension of Gordimer's fiction, he has focused on the textual politics and the craft of the author. He highlights Gordimer's complex relation to African culture and European literary form and politics of

space. Judie Newman's *Nadine Gordimer* (1988) examines how the issue of gender complicates the themes of race and colonialism in the novels of Gordimer. She has shown how in Gordimer's fiction the interaction of private and public, the complex connection between psychological and political, draws upon an awareness of the relation between genre and gender. In addition to these major approaches to the fiction of Gordimer, some other scholars also have made significant contribution to the critical studies of Gordimer. Rowland Smith, Dorothy Driver, Abdul Janmohamed, Susan Gaedner, Louise Yelin, Martin Trump and Karen Lazar are most notable among them. But none of these scholars have examined the theme of resistance in the fiction of Gordimer. The present essay proposes to fill this gap. Though it often refers to the historical contexts of Gordimer's work, it focuses mainly on how she proposes to resist apartheid.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The present essay examines how Gordimer has treated sexuality as a tool of resistance against the apartheid regime of South Africa. The argument of the thesis is developed through a critical analysis of Gordimer's novel *Occasion for Loving* in the light of postcolonial theory as forwarded by Michel Foucault. She has explored in her writings the social and psychological relationships and how they are governed by race and sex. The paper argues that Gordimer has provided through her work an alternative discourse to resist apartheid. In his books, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* Foucault has given a powerful account of the significant connections between power, knowledge, and the subject, which can be used to analyse the fiction of Gordimer. He argues that power is productive and that subjects are produced through cultural and institutional practices. He mainly focuses on practices of disciplinary power which lead to binary divisions such as sane/mad, and which can be used as a means of social control. Such practices of disciplinary power are found in apartheid South Africa. Like Foucault, Gordimer seems to consider sexuality as a site

of power relations governed by the dominant socio-cultural conventions. She has attempted to produce an alternative discourse about sexuality in *Occasion for Loving* and suggested a resistance to apartheid ideology of South Africa.

#### IV. GORDIMER'S NOVEL OCCASION FOR LOVING

In her second novel, *A World of Strangers* Gordimer explores the possibility of a multi-racial society. Her third novel, *Occasion for Loving* (1963) shows its failure as the dominant ideology to oppose segregation. Multi-racialism had been challenged since long. The African nationalists broke away from the African National Congress and founded the Pan Africanist Congress (1959) and questioned the idea of multi-racialism into question. On the other hand, the apartheid regime was implementing its policies more strictly. Gordimer was aware of this socio-political condition of the time. *Occasion for Loving* (*OL*) acknowledges this challenge and historical realities of the time. The novel explores this issue through the theme of love and sex across colour bar, which runs through South African fiction from Plomer to Paton and beyond.

The action of the novel moves around a cross racial love affair between the black artist, Gideon Shibalo and a white woman, Ann Davis. Ann comes to South Africa with her husband, Boaz. They stay with Tom and Jessie Stilwell in Johannesburg. Tom Stilwell is a university teacher who participated in the campaign against the Extension of University Education Bill. The Bill was introduced to bar the blacks from the universities. As Thompson says, this apartheid legislation was passed in 1959 to prevent the black students from enrolling in the established universities unless a cabinet minister granted them special permission (197). In a protest meeting, an acquaintance of Tom tells him: "Fight them over this business if you want to, man, but don't think that anything you do really matters. Some of you make laws, and some of you try to change them. And you don't ask us" (*OL* 69).

This shows, on the one hand, the exclusion of the blacks from the mainstream politics. On the other hand, it shows the growing suspicion of the black about the complicity of the liberal whites in the oppressive system.

Foucault argues that power is exercised in public as well as in private spheres (Ransom 28). The family is an important private sphere for the operation of power in society. In the first part of the novel, Jessie evaluates her past, her relation with her unhappily married mother. She painfully realized that she lost her youth because of her mother's confining love. Jessie's mother withdrew her from school on the pretext of a non-existent heart complaint. It left a deep scar on her mind. While watering the garden, a feeling comes to her mind that she has never left her mother's house. This is a sign of the inner struggle of Jessie to find the meaning of her past in the present situation. Both Tom and Jessie strongly believe in the sanctity of personal relationship but they ironically involve themselves in the inter-racial relationship between Ann and Gideon. However, Jessie may be said to represent Foucault's contention that public or state institutions continue the process of producing 'docile' subjects through family or individuals. Danaher et al. explain in the context of Britain that mothers were entrusted with the responsibility to perpetuate the values and attitudes of the state (Danaher 76). In South Africa, the racial differences or apartheid governed the institutions of the white family. Jessie believes that "the race business" had been settled long ago (*OL* 290). But when she comes in close touch with Ann and Gideon, she realizes how the race factor lies at the core of their life and identity. When they suddenly turn up at her family beach cottage, she discovers the effects of apartheid on her psyche. As she converses with Gideon, she gradually feels her childhood fear growing in her: "The black man that I must never be left alone with in the house. No one explained why, but it didn't matter. I used to feel, at night, when I turned my back passage and bent to wash my face in the bathroom, that someone was coming up behind me" (*OL* 290). Jessie now recognizes the racist

taboos that have been inculcated in her mind by her mother. Thus the institution of family plays an important role in the racial politics of apartheid.

Ann and Gideon were in deep love, at least for some times. They moved together, enjoyed parties. But their relation breaks down because of racial and psychological barriers. There cannot be any occasion of loving between the black and the white in the context of South Africa under apartheid. Gideon is disappointed at the racial politics in his country. He cannot go to Italy on a scholarship because the government denied him passport because of his involvement in African National Congress. So his friend Sol reacts: "Most of the whites don't want to talk to you ... *They* are the ones who decide what's going to happen to us" (original italic, *OL* 144-145). In the beginning of their relationship, Ann does not show any inhibition about race or colour. She enjoys visiting the townships and making acquaintance with the blacks. Her frank nature attracts many people to her as well. But as the narrative moves forward, she shows that she is not committed to the blacks. She does not remain faithful in her love for Gideon either. Despite her fascination for Gideon, she understands the inadequacy of their love when she runs away with him. A sense of alienation and a strange feeling comes over her during their journey to his native place. In a scene when Ann is sleeping by road, she is warned by a white African farmer of "drunk boys around on Sunday" (*OL* 268). When the man leaves, she feels a growing sense of fear in her. Ann's fear suggests that in a black majority country there is no space beyond the control of white race. And the control over space is a disciplinary practice to maintain power. The colour-blind Ann gradually becomes conscious of Gideon's colour. She tells Jessie: "You know when the man in the garage looked at Gid, and I stood next to him seeing Gid at the same time, it wasn't the same person we saw..." (*OL* 308). When they stay in the African village, Ann experiences the laws that prevent the whites and the blacks from mixing in social and public meetings in South Africa. She realizes that

blackness count even in their intimate relationship. The teacher, who provides them lodging in the African village, finally tells them to leave because of fear of persecution by the apartheid regime. Realizing the realities of racial politics in South Africa, Ann decides to leave South Africa with her husband, Boaz. This is an effect of what Foucault calls disciplinary practices which produce 'docile' subjects who are afraid to transgress the social binary oppositions. In the present instance it is inter-racial sexual relationship. The end of the affair is painful for not only Gideon but Jessie as well. She feels that there is no occasion for loving between a black and a white in the racially divided society of South Africa. Apartheid pervades through every aspects of South African life, even through the most intimate relationship of man and woman. In other words, apartheid has been internalized. The love affair between Ann and Gideon fails due to external as well as internal pressure. The Immorality Act, 1950 partially accounts for the failure of their relationship. It is the effect of disciplinary practices that silently internalized the apartheid. As Clingman says, the repressions of apartheid have become "psychologically inscribed" (82). This failure makes Jessie see the futility of any attempt love to across the racial divide: "Yet even between lovers they had seen blackness count, the personal return inevitably to the social, the private to political ... So long as the law remained unchanged, nothing could bring integrity to personal relationships" (*OL* 321). Jessie painfully realizes that Ann has not been committed to her relationship with Gideon. "She did not love him *across the colour-bar...*" (original italics, *OL* 309). Ann who once claimed to be passionately in love with Gideon leaves South Africa without even bidding good bye to him. It is this attitude of arrogance of the white people to the South African blacks that Gordimer seems to criticize. Ann finally surrenders to the barriers of apartheid. The white liberal, Ann acquiescently accepts apartheid. On the other hand, her irresponsible behaviour exasperates Jessie. She cannot come

to terms with the situation. She wonders how a person (Ann) falls in love with a man (Gideon) and at the same time destroys him. She reveals her feelings of annoyance and anger in a long conversation with Tom. He tries to calm her down and tells her that what else Ann could do if she didn't want him. She asks him not to make her suggest it. They do not distinguish between black and white; they behave decently to both the colours. She continues

But how can that ever be, so long as there's the possibility that you can escape back into your filthy damn whiteness? How do you know you'll always be fair?"

. . . . .

First he couldn't get out on his scholarship because he's black, now he can't he stay because she's white. What's the good of us to him? What's the good our friendship or her love?" (OL 312 -13)

The above conversation reveals Jessie's painful realization of discriminatory race relations between the white and the non-white. People Gideon refuse to live according to a particular "set of circumstances" governing their life and another set governing the life of the whites. Gideon expresses his true feelings when he tells Jessie "White bitch –get away" (OL 331). This is a moment of confrontation and realization for Jessie. She cannot forget the words of Gideon. They open her eyes to another reality –the pain and torture of voiceless millions like Gideon Shibalo. This understanding on the part of Jessie keeps her meeting him "in a friendly fashion sometimes in the Lucky Star, occasionally at the houses of friends" though she could not understand his words (OL 332). These (places like Lucky Star) were the places where coloured and white people mixed opposing the apartheid ideology that segregated people into different spaces. And these borderlands are the locations of culture where new dimensions of existence emerge.

## V. CONCLUSION

The interracial relationship between Ann and Gideon is also an example of the idea of resistance to the racial hegemony in the

apartheid South Africa. Gordimer has often shown the inter-racial relationship between white women and black men. She has been criticized for the depiction of this relationship because, as Ian Glen points out, liaisons between white men and black women were prevalent in South Africa (cited in Waxman 139). Gordimer has reversed the relationship to use it as subversive force against the traditional imbalance of power. The cross racial relation between Ann and Gideon may not be successful here but it points to possibility of such a sexual relation between the white and the black. This is clearly visible in Gordimer's later novel, "*My Son's Story*". Through the interracial sexual relationship Gordimer has struck the very foundation of apartheid. She suggests an alternative discourse to the generally prevalent social discourse exploring the connection between sex and power. Foucault argues that the existence of state power cannot be denied but the power relations in the lives of individuals can act as resistance to power. He believes, "Power comes from the below" (*The History* 103). And he considers sexuality as a "transfer point of power". Gordimer explores the complexity of power relations among the racial groups of South Africa through her characters' personal and sexual relations. She searches for new alliances and forms and provides an alternative discourse which may act as a resistance to the apartheid regime.

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