

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

December 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-VI

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Private Life Versus Political Clutches in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*

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Many South African writers, black and white, excelled in describing the horrors of the segregationist system known as apartheid. The Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer is no exception. Her fiction delves into the very human soul to point out the most destructive aspects that apartheid coined in the South African character. White people of conscience, like her, do strongly believe that apartheid is morally wrong, but to act or not to act against it in a politically charged milieu which necessitates active engagement is a more difficult alternative to espouse. This paper, then, casts light on this dilemma in Gordimer's novel *Burger's Daughter* (BD).

Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* dramatizes the history of South Africa. Like many of Gordimer's characters, the wide range in this novel is deeply involved in activities against the white racially-based regime of the National Party. Rosa, around whom the whole story revolves, is born to a white communist couple. To her society, she is undoubtedly her father's name bearer and successor. However, this young girl constantly thinks of herself as free from all the social roles assigned to her. What stance to maintain is really a thorny query for Rosa who is torn between the social expectations which put her under her father's umbrella and her own need to enjoy a private life.

Gordimer's choice of a female character to build the story around is neatly convenient. Intentionally, she shapes Rosa to fit the South African reality. A male hero, or a son, is unequivocally reckoned to be engaged and:

“[L]iterary and cultural presumptions would likely obligate a son to be a Telemachus or an Ascanius, following the footsteps of a heroic father. The daughter might prove an Antigone but would be excused the choice of uncommitted life, even if that meant ‘to live the life of a white lady’ ”. (Ettin 83)

By doing so, the author paves the way for Rosa's dilemma to take place.

To suffer such an inner conflict must surely be a sign of a strong personality. A weak character would rather relinquish the cause and feel at ease. With Rosa Burger, the author amply illustrates this. Even at fourteen years old, Rosa “displayed a remarkable maturity” (BD 3). She, according to the school headmistress, “came to school the morning after her mother was detained just as any other day” (BD 11). Waiting not for a long time, she remains the only surviving member of her small family with dead parents and a drowned brother. Bitterness seems to haunt her destiny.

In the first part of the novel, Gordimer comes across what living in the shadow of the father might mean for Rosa. Furthermore, how her entire life is largely shaped by the

political dogma of her parents. Rosa is conceived as nothing else apart from Burger's daughter with even the least physical detail, "a mouth exactly like her father's" (BD 10). She is raised in a house in which political activism is "the normal atmosphere" (BD 50).

All the characters are involved in politics whether willingly or fatalistically. As to the young Rosa, she starts performing political tasks right from an early age without even being dimly aware of their heavy load. At 18 years old, for instance, requested by her parents, she plays very convincingly the role of the fiancé of Noel de Witt, one of her father's imprisoned associates to easily get a visit permission to inform him of any news.

She innocently does not recognize this prevailing responsibility until her father's death; she clarifies "I lived in my father's presence without knowing its meaning" (BD 82). She is unfortunately denied most of her rights. Her life's alternatives rest largely upon the restrictions imposed by the government. Certainly, being Burger's daughter would not help to manage an ordinary private life; thus, she is constantly surveilled since she was a 14 years old girl. More than this, she complains "I have no passport because I am my father's daughter" (BD 62).

As the events of the novel progress towards the climax, we learn more about Rosa's sufferings. This time, the government refuses to offer her the permission to work in Transkei, a black homeland, since the administrator of the territory knew who she is. Bitter than this all is her continuous movement from one flat to another amidst a long array of her father's career associates. Her sense of belonging to her country is shaken, and she begins to question the roles attributed to her: "the blacks, do they know, are they grateful to whites who endanger their lives for them" (BD 18). Besides, she shows an amount of awareness when she acknowledges to Orde Greer, a photographer, "I don't know how I look when I'm being used, an object of inquiry, regarded respectfully, a notebook in hand" (BD 100). This reaction echoes in essence Jean Veneuse's in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

"I came to this world imbued with the will to find a meaning in this, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects". (Fanon 82)

The government's repressions continue to inhibit her personal life's construction. Her intellectual interests are also dictated by the former's will and in consequence she is denied the simplest possibilities open to girls of her age like studying law. The heroine's reactions speak up: "I wish to be the instrument of my own, not other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object: to be removed by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from the outside" (Isaiah Berlin qtd. in Lukes 57).

The South African charged milieu necessitates active engagement in which the will of the collective is favored over the personal will. This strongly contradicts with Sartre's concept of commitment where:

“an individual freely commits herself [sic] to a larger cause such that it becomes her own. To engage in politics, or a revolution, is to commit oneself in this fashion, but the freedom to choose includes the freedom *not* to choose to commit oneself as well”.
(Sim 93)

Mr. Burger’s death is the first turning point in the life of his daughter which awakens in her the need to “distancing her private enclosures of being” (*BD* 51). All the pressures and the expectations are radically spurned; she no longer wants to live in her father’s shadow. Instead, she chooses to subject her decisions to her own critical mind to prove herself autonomous and self-directed.

To pursue a private life and to construct a personal identity, Rosa decides to flee South Africa. With the help of Brandt Vermeulen, one of her father’s admirers, she gains a passport valid for one year. The orientation is France; it is the promised land in which the manacles of the father’s political identity are expected to be thrown away.

Rosa’s awareness and self-realization grow in parallel with the narrative structure of the novel. Part two, though shorter, pictures thoroughly the life Rosa has ever dreamt of, a life in which “nobody expects you to be more than you are” (*BD* 250). There, in France, she encounters completely different people with no political heritage to haunt their lives. It is by accident that she meets her father’s former wife, Katya (Madame Bagnali), who knew “how to defect from him” (*BD* 264). Katya comes to a conclusion holds that Rosa looks more like her mother. Being the first time to feel freed from the social constraints, Rosa’s life intersects with Mrs. Bagnali’s. She indulges in the mood of parties and enjoys her moments of being as a young lady.

Gordimer portrays her heroine as a romantic character who falls in love with a married man, the professor Bernard Chabalier. Notwithstanding the current jovial life, South Africa seems not to divorce Burger’s daughter; Chabalier is a sympathizer with the anti-apartheid movement. Reminiscent of Africa too is her aunt Velma’s daughter with whom she meets in Paris and “with whom [she] share[s] [her] grandmother’s name” (*BD* 145).

Her ambitions do not stop at France. She steps ahead towards London where she unexpectedly encounters a group of communist rebels in a party. In the latter, Rosa’s second turning point in life occurs. The party brings the missed Bassie, or the little boss in Africaans, close again. He is the son of one of Mr. Burger’s black associates whom Rosa considers as her brother. He lived his childhood in her house, but the repeated arrests and imprisonments of the Burgers set the members of the family apart. Since then, Rosa yearns to meet him. In exile, Bassie seems not to remember the kindness he received at the Burgers’ house as a child. During a traumatic conversation between the two, Rosa speaks convincingly about her father for the first time: “[e]very one in the world must be told what a great hero he [Mr. Burger] was and how much he suffered for the blacks” (*BD* 320). Bassie, a descendent of the anti-apartheid movement, nonetheless, thinks that the

struggle is that of blacks against whites; the relationship between both sides cannot be other than a state of warfare.

Rosa's aspirations to totally defect from her father evaporate because that black voice ends her "hedonistic escapism" (Peck 78). It thoroughly brings to her mind the answer to the whole enterprise she indulges herself in in France then in England. Bassie's ruthless words enlighten her to ascertain that she cannot stay motionless towards the pain resulting from the atrocious practices of apartheid, for being a South African necessitates this. As a consequence, Rosa realizes that to find a home to belong to one must always return to his origin, "[n]o one can defect" (*BD* 332). And by absorbing this, she gains a sense of resolution and returns to South Africa.

This journey sharpens her thoughts and paves the way for her to believe that "[p]ublic good is not a term opposed to the good of the individuals; on the contrary, it is the good of every individual collected" (Thomas Paine qtd. in Lukes 53). It is due to this trip that she comes to understand that ending the suffering of the black majority is attainable if all people of conscience contribute, no matter the way.

The Journey of Rosa, like Gordimer's to England, helps her to find an answer to the question 'who am I?': Rosa or Burger's daughter. Interestingly, she commits herself to the struggle but according to her own philosophy:

I don't know the ideology:
It's about suffering.
How to end suffering.
And it ends in suffering. Yes, it's strange to live in a country where there are still heroes. Like anyone else, I do what I can. *I am teaching them to walk again*, at Baragwanath Hospital. They put one foot before the other. (*BD*, Emphasis added 332)

The heroine's return to South Africa coincides with the Soweto Uprisings. Among the few whites who are detained, she "was detained without charges" (*BD* 353), and she ironically occupies the same solitary confinement her father once occupied. By that, she becomes 'Rosa Burger'.

'Rosa' and 'Burger's daughter' seem inseparable; hence, her task is "to come to grips with the past and to find a place in the present" (de Lange 88). Anyone's past constitutes a pervasive aspect in the present life. Nadine Gordimer tries to convey this through the last scene in which Rosa undergoes her parents' fate. Developed gradually, her experience evidences that past, present and future lurk in one crucible. Her past though pathetic is the seminal seed to be build upon the future crossing the 'present's river road'. To Marx and Engels, it is axiomatic that:

"[M]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by

themselves , but under circumstances directly encountered , given and transmitted from the past”. (Marks & Engels 97)

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