

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

*An International Journal in English*

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

*Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite*

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Protest Against Apartheid: A Study of the Selected Short Stories of Nadine Gordimer**

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**Article History:** Submitted-06/04/2017, Revised-27/04/2017, Accepted-29/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

### **Abstract:**

Apartheid was a social and political policy of racial segregation enforced by white government in South Africa. It was a rigid system of racial discrimination designed to maintain white supremacy over the blacks. Though it started much earlier with the white settlement in South Africa, the policy has been officially in effect since Africa's national party came to power in 1948. The implementation of the policy, later referred as 'separate development', was enforced by series of laws. Apartheid legislation classified the South Africans into four racial groups-white, black, Coloured and Asian and prohibited the most social contacts between the races. Nadine Gordimer is a fervent opponent of Apartheid system. She has always raised strong voice against Apartheid. She continued to demand, through both her writing and her activism that South African government should re-examine and replace its long held policy of Apartheid. She belongs to 'minority-within-the-white-minority who refuses to accommodate with the system. She is a writer of social commitment and her works are mirror of South African history. The present article deals with Gordimer's protest against Apartheid which was destructive of human dignity and justice with reference to some of her short stories.

**Keywords:** Apartheid, Grand Apartheid, racism, the blacks, the whites, black township, homelands, segregation

Apartheid system in South Africa was a policy of racial discrimination which meant to maintain white domination over the blacks. The racial discrimination was institutionalized with the enactment of Apartheid laws. These race laws touched every aspect of social life. They restricted already limited rights of the blacks. Legislation prescribed how the blacks could live, travel, work, be educated, get married and mingle. There was territorial separation. 'Homelands' were created for the non-white Africans and each non-white was assigned to a homeland according to the record of origin. Each race was allotted its own area. The Group Areas Act of 1950 determined where one lived, how one survived and how one earned living by virtue of racial inequality. There were 'Forced Removals' to resettle people to their designated 'group areas'. In the early hours, heavily armed police entered to force residents out of their homes and load their belongings onto government trucks. Being the citizens of the homelands, they were made

to lose their citizenship in South Africa and any right of involvement with the South African parliament which held complete hegemony over the homelands. Africans living in the homelands needed passports to enter South Africa. They were made alien in their own country. As these lands were least economically-productive areas of the country, a majority of the blacks had to work in 'white area' and they lived in tightly segregated black townships within those areas. The government strictly segregated education, medical care and other public services with inferior standard for the blacks. The blacks living in 'ghetto' or 'squatter camp' suffered from the diseases caused by malnutrition and sanitary problems. They were not allowed to run business or professional practices in 'white area'. They worked as agricultural or domestic workers on extremely low wages. Apartheid laws were implemented harshly with police brutality. The penalties for political protest, even on non-violent protests were severe. Anyone could be detained without hearing. Thus Apartheid was a social evil which created peculiar racial, cultural and social circumstances in South Africa. Many writers like Alan Paton, Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, Alfred Hutchinson, Arthur Nortje, Lewis Nkosi, Coetzee, La Guma etc. expressed their protest against Apartheid through their writing.

Apartheid had been a crucial experience for Nadine Gordimer and she writes truthfully about it. Judie Newman quotes Gordimer's statement in this connection, "If you write honestly about life in South Africa, Apartheid damns itself." (15) The present article discusses Gordimer's major thematic concern-protest against Apartheid in her short stories. She stands out as the spokesperson of the African community, promoting healthy relationships and progressive attitude as she asserts, "My time and place have been twentieth-century Africa. Emerging from it immersed in it, the first form in which I wrote was the short story."(15)

Gordimer's short story 'A City of the Dead, a City of the Living' is a realistic picture of a black township life. Samson lives with his wife, Nanike as a tenant in the black township. He works in the city as an itinerant gardener. The house is furnished with the things discarded by Samson's various employers for whom he works in the city. The other tenants living there are- a woman working in the kitchen shop in the city, a slaughter-house cleaner. The city is far from township and they have to take bus. The 'pass' is compulsory to go there. Nanike is a complacent woman who thinks themselves to be lucky to have the house. When Samson gives shelter to an activist in his house, she feels the peace of their house threatened as it is not possible to hide someone for long time. They have sent their son to a mission school as it is not safe there. The activist tries to explain to Samson that the blacks should stick together. They should not send their children away. The whites have shut the blacks in ghetto forcing them to kill each other. He asserts that they should fight united to overthrow the white regime. The activist is accused in a case of blowing up a police station and wanted by the police. Samson is

ready to keep him in the house. But Nanike could not bear the tension of hiding the activist with a gun. She could no longer live under the pressure in which the police might raid the house anytime and arrest them. The knocks at the door at night add to her tension. On a Sunday they have to lock themselves inside the house to avoid acquaintances. Gordimer skillfully delineates the tense mood in the house, especially Nanike's psychological pressure.

The story 'Blinder' throws light on the black people's servile, ineffectual life. The black people "whose lives are not easy, poor people, to whom things happen but who don't have the means, either to extricate themselves from what has happened." (85) They are deprived of the resources or means by the whites. Rose, a black domestic servant in a white family lives in the backyard. Her husband had disappeared before she took the job. Her lover, Ephraim who works as a night watchman is living with her. Gordimer reveals the reality of Apartheid society. It was a usual thing that a young man came to work in a city. He spent his whole life there away from his home because he had to earn money to send home. Gordimer focuses on the entwining of personal fate with the political policies. Ephraim is killed in a bus accident when he is going home due to trouble over land. There is a dispute over the ancestral land granted to his family by their local chief. Gordimer portrays 'Grand Apartheid'-partition of South Africa in homeland system:

Boundary lines have been drawn by government surveyors,...the partition of the local chief's territory that falls on that side is no longer part of South Africa. The portion that remains on the other side now belongs to the South African government and will be sold to white farmers-Ephraim's father's land, his brother's land, his brother's land, his land. (84)

Gordimer is mostly concerned with the impact of Apartheid on an individual's life. Rose, on her lover's death is left alone. She is even not informed officially about it, as she is not his wife. She learns about it after a week. Ephraim's wife has got the right to bury and mourn him. She gets his possessions. Rose is left alone. Gordimer focuses Rose's loneliness by describing her sudden excitement over the arrival of Ephraim's wife and children. They have come there in the 'simpleton' hope of getting pension from the employers. Rose excitedly introduces them to the lady which seems strange enough. She borrows money from the lady for their returning journey. She is too much happy with Ephraim's relatives, because she knows there will be no more arrival in her lonely life.

'What Were You Dreaming?' is another story depicting 'Grand Apartheid' in South Africa. It is about Apartheid legislation, classification of the population, the black townships in the white cities, homelands and forced removals. The black-white relationship is narrated from the points of view of a black man and a white lady. The black man is given lift by the lady and her friend from England. He is curious about the

man's background. The lady acts as an interpreter. She explains to him the black man's answers. The black man tells that he is on the road from six days and has not eaten since the previous day. The Englishman who is not cognizant to the Apartheid realities sympathizes with the black man. But the lady does know very well how to take the story. She explains to her friend "...they're theatrical by nature. You must take it with a pinch of salt."(220) She is a representative of cold, brutal white class who justifies the Apartheid system. She justifies the 'forced removals' as –

...we're talking about the destroying communities because they're black, and white people want to build houses or factories for whites where blacks live. I told you. We're talking about loading up trucks and carting black people out of sight of whites. (221)

She even justifies the 'segregated black townships' in the white cities. She believes the black should not be allowed to live in the cities with the white people. She just wants them 'out of sight'.

The story 'Once Upon a Time' portrays the realm of terror, insecurity and distrust in the violent-ridden South Africa. The writers living in such circumstances could not escape from it. That is why when she is telling a bedtime story for children, it cannot but be full of violence and fear. She narrates in the narration style peculiar to the children story, a story of the rich white couple living in a beautiful suburb and making every arrangement for their son's safety. They have a housemaid who is absolutely trustworthy and an itinerant gardener who is highly recommended by the neighbours. They get electronically-controlled gates fitted to their house and anyone who wants to enter the house would have to announce by pressing a button and speaking into a receiver relayed to the house. As they hear about the instances of burglary in the suburb, burglar bars are attached to the windows of the house. They hear about the buses being burned, cars stoned, the schoolchildren shot by the police. The riots are suppressed. But still, they would not trust anyone. Many unemployed blacks are hanging about the suburb importuning for a job and begging. They do not help those blacks as they might turn out to be burglars. Still, there are more reports of intrusion, burglary every day. So, ultimately, as a part of the security arrangement they set 'Dragon-Teeth' razor-bladed coils all around the walls of the house. But this very arrangement kills their son. The child pretending to be a prince from a fairy story jumps on the terrible coils. It is a horrible death. The bleeding mass of the little boy hacked out of the security coils with saws, wire-cutters, choppers. According to Gordimer, there should be perfect reciprocal understanding and affection between black and white people's mind. The mechanical arrangement cannot stop death or violence. She suggests through the story though Apartheid system favoured the whites over the blacks, the unjust policy was harmful for the both blacks and whites. If there is distrust and fear in people's mind, no society can be happy and everyone gets affected by it.

The story 'The Moment Before the Gun Went Off' reveals Gordimer's firm faith in inter-dependence and inter-relation between the blacks and the whites. According to her the blacks and the whites can live together cordially and can have most intimate relationship. Here, she criticizes the concepts rooted in the minds of both the blacks and whites about their relationships. A white farmer, Marais Van der Vyver shoots one of his farm laborers dead. Actually the boy is killed accidentally and not deliberately. But the incident is interpreted in different ways. The white people treat it in their usual casual way. They think that the white man might have really killed the servant boy. But it is not much serious crime for them. The blacks create uproar against the event. The black agitators criticize and condemn the white man's callousness. No one could imagine the fact that the man has killed the boy accidentally and has wept for his death, because the boy is not only his servant but his own son. Gordimer also depicts the black people's poverty and weakness. The servant boy and his family work on the farm owned by their white master. The white man provides money for the funeral. The dead boy's mother and he stare at the grave in perfect communication regarding what might have happened in 'the moment before the gun went off'.

The story 'Keeping Fit' is one more record of the violent-ridden society under Apartheid. A white man while his running exercise in the morning inadvertently crosses the white suburb's boundaries and enters a black township, the 'unrest area'. He finds himself among the black armed men with knives, cleavers, sledges, hammers, etc. chasing another man. The man sees the mob murdering that man with their terrible weaponry-"the body writhed away like a chopped worm." (233) He too, may have been murdered like that. But he is suddenly pushed into a shack and is saved. It is a black woman who has saved his life. This sudden assault and unexpected rescue leaves him aghast. Being a white man, before this event he did not know how it was inside the shacks. He sees seven people living in that small shack where "too few possessions were too many for it to hold." (240) Gordimer presents before us picture of both-dirty, crowded, ugly life in a shack of blacks and the white man's house with silk curtains, dressing table, garden, etc. On witnessing death so closely, the white man has understood what it is meant by 'the struggle for existence'. That is why when a bird is caught in the drain-pipe and is struggling to escape- the man becomes panicky. He shouts for its escape. His wife shouts back at him and tells him to free the bird himself as he is very much athletic. Gordimer symbolically suggests some home truths here. The white man goes for running to have fresh breath, but this very right is denied to the blacks by forcing them to live in crowded shacks. The man does exercise to keep himself fit. But the white oppressors are not aware of the need to keep social health or fitness. When the man has the first-hand experience of 'the struggle for existence', he could feel the bird's pains. His wife asks the man to free the bird himself as he is so athletic. Gordimer suggests the need of athletic efforts on the part of sympathetic whites to free the blacks from the clutches of bondages.

The story 'Jump' exemplifies how even after the Apartheid policy cancelled, the racial hatred continued in the people's mind. A young white man is victimized by racial hatred. He is an ordinary colonial child of parents who have come from Europe to find a 'better life'. His weekend hobbies are parachute jumping and photography. His artistic activity traps him. While taking photograph of a sea-bird, he is arrested by the black soldiers. He is detained and accused of being spy. In the debriefing, he is made to confess the crime of terroristic activities which he had not committed. The story points out hatred on the part of one class of people leads further to hatred on the part of another class-

...for the first time in his life he thought about blacks and hated them and their government and everything they might do, whether it was good or bad. (8)

The innocent, brave youth with artistic mind is converted into a terrorist. He is drawn towards a white secret organization which is working to restore the white rule through the compliant black proxies. There he gets really associated with the murderous horde that burns down hospitals, cuts off the ears of the villagers, blows up trains full of innocent workers 'going home to their huts', rapes women, captures men and forces them to join the organizations or put them back over the border to die. The story emphasizes the entwining of social, political with the personal lives. The young man's parents return to their country. His mother repents for allowing their son 'that parachute nonsense' (12) which has made a mess of their lives. She waits for her son. But the son has now gone far above in the 'parachute' from where he cannot jump though his conscience makes him restless.

Apartheid had everlasting impact on South African society. It created mutual distrust, prejudices among the blacks and the whites. The whites, having extraordinary sense of their whiteness, were always shielded and favoured by the police and law. Whereas the blacks vulnerable to poverty and powerlessness, were insulted and made feel themselves inferior. The policy 'destructive of justice and human dignity' pervaded South African culture and stagnated their development. Gordimer criticizes the white characters who take pride in keeping themselves apart from the blacks and claiming their superiority. In the story 'What Were You Dreaming?', she ironically exposes the snobbery of a white lady who justifies 'Forced Removals' of the blacks. There are black characters who due to consistent oppression, injustice and insult have lost their dignity as human beings. The black man in the story is such a victim of 'Yes-bass' system. Gordimer presents before us the black activists as well as the white activists fighting for the cause of the blacks. There are also black informers of the police and the black police shooting and arresting their own people thereby becoming obstacle in the liberation of their own people. Thus, she wants to create awareness among the blacks who act against their own people.

Gordimer's stories chronicle life under apartheid. They deal with the effects of Apartheid on the lives of the South Africans and the moral and the psychological tensions of life in the racially-divided country. While portraying violence ridden post-Apartheid Africa, she is mostly concerned with the individuals, their happiness and sorrows, aspirations and yearnings. She believes in the inter-dependence and inter-relation between the blacks and the whites. According to her the blacks and the whites can live together happily and can have most intimate relationship. She sadly points out that the colour bar does not allow the races to mingle with each other. She records the way people go about their daily lives and interactions with one another in the myriad tensions of a brutal police state. The stories examine how people cope with the terrible choices forced on them by violence, racial hatred in the state. She shows wide difference between the lives of the blacks and the whites. She contrasts the ugly, dirty life in 'Squatter Camps' or 'black township' with the rich amenities in the houses protected by compound walls and gates in the suburbs. Her stories express her faith in the necessity of perfect reciprocal understanding and affection between the blacks and the whites. She recommends that the liberal whites should play active role in the liberation of the blacks.

Nadine Gordimer is not among the whites who manage to ignore the crisis in the country. For her it is 'the determining state of mind'. While depicting the political turmoil in South Africa in her short stories, she protests Apartheid system and supports the Liberation Movement. It is the major theme of her writing. She joined the African National Congress when it was still listed as an illegal organization by the South African government. She helped to found the Congress of South African writers which was mainly joined by black writers. She has publicly accepted the necessity for the whites to play a role in South Africa only on black terms. She welcomed the Black Trade Union Movement as providing one of the few areas where the whites could work 'with' rather than patronizing 'for' the blacks.

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