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A Guest of Honour: A Post-Apartheid Approach from Nadine Gordimer

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Abstract:

Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* illustrates the developments leading to what he calls the “permanent victory” of the colonised as “episodic” in nature. According to him, the emancipation of the colonised never arises as an accident of history in an unprogrammable quagmire. Rather, such historical developments could be practically seen as striking in apparent phases, where each phase marks a gradual displacement of colonising socio-political structures.

The novel, *A Guest of Honour*, published in 1970, is evocative of a definite realist novel, which brings out an elaborate sense of political existence. *A Guest of Honour* is of an epic proportion, for which Gordimer said that she has put everything she knew into this book. She gives voice to the future of South Africa in a foreshadowing tone as she foresees the difficulties consequent on the transference of power from the whites to the blacks. The pernicious increase of labour agitation, strikes, which take the shape of a fiery riots, vehement political unrest and tribal in fighting, are well pictured in this novel.

Keynotes: Victory, Displacement, colonised and Politics.

When colonial rule began to tumble in different parts of the world from the 1940s onwards, there ascended the demand for latest theories to aid in examining the aftermath that colonial regime had exercised, and sustained to exercise, on its subjects. Frantz Fanon discussed the psychological impressions of “being colonial” in *Black Skin, White Masks* and the composition of Edward Said on the association between “the west” and “the orient” surfaced the ground for a sizeable figure of concept on the outcome of colonialism both on the colonised as well as the coloniser.

The novel, *A Guest of Honour*, published in 1970, is evocative of a definite realist novel, which brings out an elaborate sense of political existence. Though, Nadine Gordimer does not claim herself to be a political writer, still her narrative fiction display a clear form of political argument. Political conflict forms the centre of *A Guest of Honour*. She gives voice to the future of South Africa in a foreshadowing tone as she foresees the difficulties consequent on the transference of power from the whites to the blacks. The pernicious increase of labour agitation, strikes, which take the shape of a fiery riots, vehement political unrest and tribal in fighting, are well pictured in this novel. The political movements created

an upheaval in a country, threatening to destabilize it completely. For most of her writing career under the shadow of apartheid, Gordimer repugned the overriding nature of South African reality, and that repugnance had a political importance. Gordimer avers, "I tried to write a political novel treating the political theme as personally as a love story. I tried to put flesh on what have come to be known as the dry bones of political life" (Bazin & Seymour 57). Gordimer has given a realistic touch to this novel with a political analysis of the era. *A Guest of Honour*, with such a rich and powerful theme acts as a landmark in her handling of native black Africans. It acquaints the reader with a world of extremist and revolutionary situations, interpreting the intensive tension of present day Africa. The novel points towards the fall of liberalism during the 1960s in South Africa.

The novel brings in many areas of concern, such as knowingness that the government by the blacks in the autonomous Africa has failed to provide social and political justice that a more civilized and democratic rule should come that completely destroys the role of the white racialists in Africa. However, various principles, such as interracial marriages and friendship, becomes irrelevant as black leaders seek to come up with their own ideology on power and try to exploit it accordingly. The novel indicates the rising force in South Africa to move beyond liberalism towards an extremist political activity. Gordimer in a very adroit way deals with such issues in this novel and foresees the adaptation needed by the white liberal to survive in black Africa. In a way there is a constant struggle between the imperial powers representing the good and the evil side of the colonization. Fanon regards:

...the colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil...The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare admit it, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. (Fanon3-4)

Gordimer has given a realistic touch to this novel with a political analysis of the era. It acquaints the reader with a world of extremist and revolutionary situations, interpreting the intensive tension of present day Africa. The novel points towards the fall of liberalism during the 1960s in South Africa. The novel has its setting in some fictional republic that has just gained independence from long colonial rule having strong affinity with Central Africa, especially Zambia. It is the first time Gordimer has shifted her location outside South Africa. Her understanding of the people of the 'Dark Continent' is remarkable. Moreover, *A Guest of Honour* reflects her South African political consciousness in general during the time when it was written. The novel showcased many challenges and opportunities, which came in the path to achieve political independence in the fictional country.

The novel indicates the rising force in South Africa to move beyond liberalism towards an extremist political activity. Gordimer in a very adroit way deals with such issues in this novel and foresees the adaptation needed by the white liberal to survive in black Africa. The basic idea of this novel is to present that a white liberal could also play an

important role in the freedom struggle of a country where his companions are ruling with a heavy hand. James Bray, a European character narrates the whole story from his point of view till he meets his death and after his death it is his lover Rebecca Edwards who share his thoughts. Only the last page unwraps the point of view of other characters. In *A Guest of Honour*, the central figures are political men. The novel tells the story of an unspecified, newly independent African nation's tumultuous events as visualized through the eyes of an erstwhile Colonial official, Evelyn James Bray who was expatriated from the country ten years before by the Colonial government for encouraging the ascent and emergence of the People's Independent Party which then was insurgent. People's Independent Party, which is now in power, invites James Bray to be a part of the independence celebrations of the country in which he once served as Colonial administrator. Bray, as a staunch supporter of the movement for Independence believed that the country belonged to Africans and did not adopt the Colonial line of thinking that the African race is inferior. During the struggle for independence he worked with Adamson Mweta, now President, and Edward Shinza, a trade unionist. He returns to Africa for the Independence celebration of the country he helped to free as a guest of honour as "the white stranger ... in a modest place of honour" (27).

The action in *A Guest of Honour* takes place through the final year of Bray's life when he is invited by Mweta to be a part of the celebrations and help in the developmental task of the newly created African nation. In Africa, Bray is reconnected with the white community he left ten years before: those who welcomed freedom from British Colonial rule like Roly Dando now Attorney General, the Wentzes, proprietors of the silver rhino hotel and pub, and the Neil Bayley, principal of the University. However, Shinza is neither included in the committee of the cabinet of government ministers nor invited for the independent celebrations because of his serious differences with Mweta over what method should be adopted "to build a nation" (118). Mweta's methods for running the government are those, which were used by his white Colonial officials. John Cooke asserts that, "Gordimer proves surprisingly deft in introducing ... the large cast of characters" (134).

Bray's stay is extended as he is "drawn helplessly and not unenjoyably into everything" (27) around him and he yields to the pressure from his longtime political friend, Adamson Mweta, into accepting the "newly created post" of special educational advisor (70) in the northern district of Gala where he was posted antecedently. There he is reunited with the influential and intelligent Shinza who is living in rural banishment. Bray learns that independence, instead of bringing the two men closer, has only widened the gap between them. Bray aligns himself with the revolutionary motives of the expelled Shinza as he gets acquainted with the neo-colonialist nature of Mweta's rule, which hoodwinks the real idea of independence. He thought that he has come back not to help "to build a nation" (118) but to witness "the symbolic attainment of something he had believed in, willed and worked for, for a good stretch of his life" (21). Stephen Clingman points out that:

[T]he white man in Africa has had no image for himself other than as mentor- but soon he has to search for a new image and attempt to define new grounds for his role. For Bray finds himself confronted with a more advanced form of the same kind of dilemma he

experienced as a colonial administrator; under Mweta he finds the country in the grip of a thoroughgoing neo colonialism, and he is once again faced with the prospect of historical choice. (118)

The novel analyzes the worthlessness of colonial educational system that Bray comes across as an educational advisor. He noticed that the native children were sent to the colonial schools where the learning process is centered on learning of foreign cultures that did not really belong to them and created a barrier between them and their culture. The Education Department has worked towards abolishing the various woodworking and shoemaking workshops so that everyone is able to get proper education, “the black man was no longer to be trained just sufficiently to do the white man’s odd jobs for him” (107).

The poor working conditions and accidental deaths, which was the straight repercussion of the colonial inheritance, created flurry among the black population of the country. The trade unions are at conflict with Mweta’s government as there is no successful opposition because the country is yet to reach a certain level of industrialization. The bourgeois, despite its efforts of reconciliation, is not strong enough to bring any considerable change:

Sociologically, the bourgeoisie did everything in its power to eradicate the fact of class conflict from the consciousness of society, even though class conflict had only emerged in its purity and became established as an historical fact with the advent of capitalism. (Lukacs 62)

Gordimer gives us images of a polity whose indigenous leadership is completely disrupted by acute ideological discord. The lack of efficient cooperation between president Mweta and his one-time ally in the independence struggle, Edward Shinza, is the major impediment to the development of the country. The root cause of this rivalry is the determined competitive power struggle over which neither of the two contestants is inclined to give ground to the other, which poses enormous peril to the survival of the polity. Gordimer, in this African novel, is dealing again with one of her predominant South African concerns, as Bray is a ‘White African’ like the novelist; his position becomes critical in political picture of the country. Stephen Clingman expresses that “South Africa was methodically being broken up into an interlocking system of classes and sub-classes, and dispersed and centralized elites, all in the fundamental interests of white profit and white power” (116). The façade of political independence sealed the reality of continued exploitation. Bray thought that for blacks, white men are responsible for manipulating power in a continent that they never evicted, whereas, the whites believed that it is the tribalism and the interference of the east and the west that is to be blamed. In allusion to Gordimer, Greenstein asserts:

[...] even her acid ability to expose the bad faith that can infect the white desire for affiliation with blacks in South Africa cannot disguise the family resemblance to the literature of empire in which white adventurers seek exotic experience in the African "heart of

darkness." Whether powered by white curiosity and guilt, or set in motion by admirable motives and the relative freedom of whites in South Africa to act on political fiction, it is a plot that always threatens to colonize black experience. (230)

In this novel Bray's meditations concern one of the most powerful of political thinkers within the African context, Frantz Fanon. Bray's interest in Fanon is seen when he gets up in the middle of the night to check a reference in full:

The people find out that the iniquitous fact of exploitation can wear a black face, or an Arab one; and they raise the cry of 'Treason!' But the cry is mistaken; and the mistake must be corrected. The treason is not national, it is social. The people must be taught to cry 'Stop thief!' (292)

The idea behind writing this novel is to create a serious political novel, which will support the prerequisites of Lukac's ideas on class-conflict. Gordimer relates her novel with the path-breaking book of Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. *A Guest of Honour* is a revolution of the greatest importance, touching the entire way in which one comprehends the realities of the country and suggests a plan of action for change. No longer have the novel signified 'National' or 'Race' oppression, but class relations become a basic element to be practiced. Bray realized during his stay in Africa that the poor black natives were fed up of the oppressive politics and wanted peace to come in their lives. Mweta's political party's capitalist ideas have not gone well with the general public. Even Antonio Gramsci believed that,

[P]ower is not imposed from above, but the operations of power depend upon consent from below - power is produced and reproduced in the everyday interaction of life - power is ubiquitous. Control of state power without hegemony in civil society is an insecure basis for a socialist programme. (Mallick 162)

Gramsci advocates that, "Party is an educational institution, which offers a counter culture, whose aim is to gain ascendancy in most aspects of civil society as opposed to directly political institution before gaining State power" (Mallick 162). Gordimer, through *A Guest of Honour* has revealed the hypocrisy, avarice, and racial personality of the new government. She has looked profoundly into the demeanor of the white colonial settler's impact on Mweta's autocratic rule in her country and exhibited well in her novel. She witnesses the complete situation of Africa politically, in the light of the colonial and economic exploitation.

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