

---

## RACIAL AND GENDER ISSUES IN THE WORKS OF NADINE GORDIMER

**Dr.Ashu Tomar**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English  
Rajkiya Engineering College, Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh  
Email id: [ashu.tomar24@gmail.com](mailto:ashu.tomar24@gmail.com)

### **Abstract:**

*Nadine Gordimer's literary corpus spans several decades and reflects the turbulent socio-political landscape of South Africa during apartheid. This abstract focuses on the thematic exploration of racial and gender issues in her works, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which Gordimer engages with these interconnected facets of oppression. Gordimer's narratives often center around the racial tensions and injustices inherent in the apartheid system. Her characters grapple with the dehumanizing effects of racial segregation, institutionalized discrimination, and the struggle for equality. Through vivid storytelling, Gordimer unveils the harsh realities of apartheid and its profound impact on individuals and communities. In addition to racial issues, Gordimer delves into gender dynamics within the context of apartheid. She explores the experiences of women who navigate societal expectations, patriarchal structures, and the intersecting challenges of race and gender. The roles women play in the resistance movement and the effects of political turmoil on familial and gender relationships feature prominently in her narratives. Many of Gordimer's characters are involved in acts of resistance, embodying the struggle against apartheid. The narratives highlight the ways in which racial and gender issues intersect in the fight for justice and liberation. Gordimer emphasizes the importance of collective action in dismantling oppressive systems.*

**keywords:** Racial, gender, Nadine Gordimer's

### **Introduction**

Nadine Gordimer, a prominent South African writer and Nobel laureate in Literature (1991), dedicated much of her work to exploring the complex and deeply rooted issues of racial and gender inequality in the context of apartheid in South Africa. Born in 1923 and passing away in 2014, Gordimer lived through and actively opposed the institutionalized segregation and discrimination that characterized South African society for much of the 20th century.

In her literary works, Gordimer delves into the intricacies of racial and gender dynamics, offering a nuanced and often critical perspective on the social and political structures that perpetuated inequality. Her writing spans a range of genres, including novels, short stories, and essays, and is marked by a commitment to truth-telling and an unflinching examination of the human condition.

**Racial Issues:** There is a strong connection between the historical and political background of apartheid and Gordimer's investigation of racial issues by a significant amount. A system of legalised racial segregation and discrimination, apartheid was implemented by the National Party administration from 1948 until the early 1990s. It was in place for a period of time. The writings of Gordimer, such as "Burger's Daughter" (1979) and "July's People" (1981), illustrate the terrible realities that people who live in a society that is ethnically separated must endure. She provides a criticism of the systematic inequities that characterised South Africa throughout this time period, shedding light on the dehumanising impacts that apartheid had on both the oppressed and the oppressors.

**Gender Issues:** Gordimer also addresses gender issues within the broader context of apartheid. While racial oppression was a central theme in her work, she did not overlook the intersecting dynamics of gender inequality. In novels like "Burger's Daughter," she explores the challenges faced by women in a society that perpetuates both racial and gender discrimination. The characters in her works grapple with societal expectations, restrictive gender roles, and the limitations placed on women's agency.

Gordimer's writing reflects her commitment to social justice, and she was actively involved in the anti-apartheid movement. Through her literary contributions, she sought to raise awareness of the human cost of apartheid and to advocate for a more just and equitable society.

As readers engage with Nadine Gordimer's works, they are invited to confront the harsh realities of apartheid-era South Africa and to consider the broader implications of systemic oppression on both individual lives and society as a whole. Her exploration of racial and gender issues remains a powerful testament to the role literature can play in challenging injustice and promoting social change.

### **Apartheid and Racial Injustice:**

"Burger's Daughter" (1979): This novel delves into the life of Rosa Burger, the daughter of anti-apartheid activists. Through Rosa's experiences, Gordimer explores the complexities of identity, loyalty, and the personal costs of political activism in a racially divided society.

"July's People" (1981): This novel imagines a dystopian future where apartheid has collapsed, and it explores the power dynamics and shifting relationships between races. The story follows a white family seeking refuge with their black servant, July, highlighting the complex and uneasy interdependence between the oppressed and their oppressors.

### **Gender Roles and Women's Struggle:**

"The Conservationist" (1974): While this novel primarily addresses issues of race and class, it also touches on gender dynamics. The protagonist's relationships with women reflect traditional gender roles and the limitations placed on women in a patriarchal society.

"July's People" (1981): In addition to its exploration of racial issues, this novel also addresses gender dynamics. Maureen, the white protagonist, undergoes a transformation in her understanding of power and identity, challenging traditional gender roles as she navigates the shifting social landscape.

### **Social Commentary:**

Short Stories: Many of Gordimer's short stories also address racial and gender issues. "Six Feet of the Country" and "Country Lovers" are examples that depict the harsh realities of apartheid, exploring forbidden relationships across racial lines and the consequences of societal norms.

### **Humanism and Critique:**

Gordimer's works often reflect a humanistic perspective, highlighting the shared humanity of individuals irrespective of race or gender. At the same time, she critiques the dehumanizing impact of apartheid and challenges prevailing social norms that perpetuate discrimination.

In addition to being a prolific writer, Nadine Gordimer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize, is a white South African novelist. In accordance with Gordimer, who serves as the spokesperson for her people, the humanistic aspect of persons is something that she is a firm believer in. She was presented with the Nobel Prize in 1991, the year she was awarded it. As far as Alfred Nobel was concerned, she was a lady "who through her magnificent epic writing has been of very great benefit to humanity." These words were spoken by Nobel. For her achievements, she received recognition and distinction. Gordimer's writings addressed a wide range of moral and racial issues, with a particular emphasis on the apartheid regime that existed in South Africa. There were a number of publications that were not allowed to be published during that time period, including Burger's Daughter and July's People. During the period when the African National Congress was forbidden from functioning, she became a member of the organisation and became an active participant in the anti-apartheid movement. Additionally, she offered Nelson Mandela advice during the famous defence address that he gave in 1964 during the trial that culminated in him being sentenced to life in prison after being found guilty. Additionally, she was active in the battle against the spread of HIV/AIDS. Nadine Gordimer has spent her whole life in South Africa, where she has been a witness to the brutal apartheid rule ever since she was a little child. She has continued to remain there throughout her entire life. One of the convictions that she had from

the beginning of apartheid until it was finally abolished was that the enforcement of racism was unfair. This belief was utterly incapable of being shaken.

As Nadine Gordimer was growing up in South Africa, where there are only 5.6 million white people out of a total population of 37.9 million, she saw that she was becoming more and more conscious of her "whiteness." In an instant, the colour of her skin sent the message that she was a kind of oppression to people of African descent in South Africa. However, it was like a face that she could not wash off, a mask that she could not remove. Her whiteness imposed upon her a social and political identity that she did not embrace. Despite this, she was unable to remove it. Within the realm of international literature throughout the 20th century, the African literary heritage stands out as one of the most significant characteristics or components. The works of African citizens who are now residing on African land are present in this particular instance. These essays illustrate the difficulties that African natives experience in respect to issues of race, gender, social issues, cultural issues, and identity concerns. During an interview that took place in 1978, she made the following statement: "In South Africa, one wears one's skin like a uniform." Shame is a shade that is practically associated with white. The act of making an effort to divorce her individual identity from that of her ethnic group was something that she did somewhat frequently. This action was taken with the purpose of avoiding being ostracised or perhaps shot by individuals who saw whites as a "enemy."

In her writings, she tackles topics related to gender, racism, and identity. The term "African Literature" refers to works written in any of the many African languages and reflecting any of the several colonial contexts in which they were created. The cultural traditions, colonial past, and internal conflicts that every African person faces are reflected in it. Literary works of Europeans in the twentieth century, like those of Doris Lessing, Alan Paton, and Nadine Gordimer, skewed perceptions of Africans and their traditions. But African authors fought back against these idealised depictions, using myths and symbols to paint a more accurate picture of the indigenous people of Africa and the Europeans.

Nadine Gordimer has always depicted her home country of South Africa in her literary works. Over the course of several decades, Gordimer wrote extensively on her culture and the social changes that occurred during and after the apartheid era. Central to her stories is the topic of exile, whether it is from a social, gender, or identity perspective. The characters in Gordimer's stories face comparable struggles, grappling with societal expectations as well as their own identities. Furthermore, Gordimer delves into the subjective patriarchal frameworks used to characterise her female leads, illuminating the conflict between gender standards and social status. Gordimer's underappreciated short story "The Second Sense," her post-apartheid novel "The Pickup," and her apartheid-era collection of short stories "Soldier's Embrace" all highlight the potential within gendered spaces and the ways in which these spaces are limited when a person crosses the colour line. These pieces represent a small selection of Gordimer's vast body of work, but they include a range of feminine situations depicted at various points in her creative process, both before and during apartheid (and the Immorality Act).

Gordimer devotes much attention to the role of children because of their status as future torchbearers. As a result, Gordimer's works feature prominently children and childhood. This is because it is the responsibility of the younger generation alone to build a society devoid of inequity. We hear Helen's first-person narrative of her experience with racial discrimination in the little mining town during *The Lying Days*. The vastly different living conditions experienced by Black and white children provide as stark evidence of the disparity in their upbringing. Her Black counterparts, in contrast to Helen, eat and play in filthiest places, wear tattered clothing, and live in filthiest houses. Helen, in contrast, has a lavish lifestyle that includes fantastic parties, entertainment, and a good education. After her ex-Indian husband passes away, Anna Louw takes on the responsibility of caring for his younger sister, Urmila,

during *A World of Strangers*. Because of her liberal outlook, Anna is acting in accordance with Gordimer's belief that nurturing children is crucial, since they are the stakeholders of the future.

The seed of Rosa's revolutionary potential is sown in her early childhood in *Burger's Daughter*. Just one more example like this. The continual exposure Rosa had as a child to her parents' struggle against apartheid was the spark that lit a fire within her that she would later use to join their cause. We must not lose sight of the fact that Baasie, her "black brother," is a relative. The Burgers let the black kids in their neighbourhood use their pool so they have something to do when they're bored. Similarly, Baasie spends the vast majority of his time working with the Burgers. As Rosa looks back on her life, she remembers the warmth and acceptance she felt growing up with Baasie. Long after Rosa has been unconcerned with the plight of her fellow Black people in her own country, she is startled to hear from them by phone. In a similar vein, July's "People" depicts the Smales youngsters settling into life in July's bush hamlet with their unnamed "Black friends." The three of them, Victor, Royce, and Gina, effortlessly adapt to their new home. Together with the children of the hamlet, they partake in various activities, such as dining and drinking. In a twist of fate, the children's exposure to the severe conditions of rural life actually helps them acquire immunity to a broad range of diseases.

In his book "People," released in July 2010, Gordimer demonstrates more than simply the impasse that apartheid sentenced interracial encounters to. Simultaneously, she envisions a perfect future where South Africans unite to tackle the overwhelming social and economic issues they encounter. The identity crisis has emerged as a result of the changing dynamics of July's relationship with the Smales family. Despite their need on July for protection, housing, and other basic needs, Maureen and Bamford persist in treating him like a servant, which highlights their inability to overcome their White privilege. July still attends to all of their needs and serves them the tea they used to have first thing in the morning. July and Maureen are often bickering, and when July starts hoarding the car keys, Maureen starts to suspect him. Maureen insists on arguing with July even though the Smales are liberals and claim to have treated their Black servant better than other White owners. The stark contrast between the Smales' lavish mansion and July's backwoods shack exposes the hypocrisy and irony of liberal pretence. Even though they seemed to be progressive, July's masters paid him a pitiful income and let him visit his homeland just twice a year. Multiple identities exist within each given race, expanding the definition of racial identity beyond the binary of white and black. Both the pro-apartheid Whites and the liberal Smales family fought back against the city's rebels; the former fled and supported the anti-apartheid campaign. Before the tribal leader, Bamford also declares his support for the Blacks. In response to the city's rebels, both of these factions are engaging in combat. There are two kinds of people that Gordimer finds even among Black people. Some people distrusted Whites and refused to adopt their ways of life; the tribal leader was one such person; he could only speak and understand his own native language, not English. The village regions are mostly inhabited by these sort of people. Among the other group are July's mother and wife, the latter of whom even calls them "White people." You know what? They're really powerful, my child. Quite perceptive, these folks. You will never be able to do all that they are capable of. There is mutual distrust and bigotry between the two ethnic groups, and it is all down to racial politics. Contrarily, there are African-Americans who desire independence but are unwilling to use violence to get it. Similar to July's persona, these people would choose racial equality over radicalism. A lot of what July does and thinks is similar to Mandela's attitude of forgiving white people.

Buchi Emecheta is widely considered to be among the most significant postcolonial African female authors. She was born in Nigeria. She gained fame for her powerful depictions of current African cultural standards that clash with one another and the enslavement of women. She brought attention to the unfairness of traditional, male-oriented African social traditions that relegate women to a life of

motherhood, servitude, and victimisation in several of her prominent works, including *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

Almost without exception, the heroes in Emecheta's works are able to overcome any and all obstacles they encounter. In the films *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch*, her archetype Adah uses her strong will and sense of self-determination to overcome the limitations put on her by her ethnic background and the psychological reliance that comes with being a woman. The metaphorical birth of her art represents her liberation from limiting beliefs and the beginning of her journey towards a new identity. Adah, according to Iyer, "emerges from her tribulations a prouder and wiser woman, possibly a *mélange* of progressive African and western cultural paradigms," meaning that she is becoming progressively liberated from the regressive aspects of her two cultures and is setting out on a path of self-discovery and transcendence.

Historically, African womanist critique has tended to advance a cause that prioritises the well-being of the full human race, sex included. Ogunyemi, he further describes it:

Black womanism is a philosophical approach that acknowledges and honours black heritage and the ideal of black existence, while simultaneously providing a balanced approach to the concept of black womanhood. It is concerned with the struggle for sexual power among black people just as much as it is with the power systems of the world that allow black people to be subjugated...Its goal is to represent the dynamic of completeness and self-healing that may be observed in the last chapters of womanist novels that are uplifting and integrative. (Womanism72)

Womanism is an approach to social change that prioritises equality and empowerment of women. Although it is primarily a liberation movement for women of colour, its ultimate goal is the inherent completeness of all humans, regardless of colour. Also, it promotes gender equality by allowing men and women to succeed in their careers, which is indicative of a tolerant viewpoint. There is a strong emphasis on women's empowerment, but males are also encouraged to shed their chauvinistic ways. Despite their similarities to feminist literature, the womanist books have their own unique qualities, as we have seen in Emecheta's case.

It is possible to conclude that womanism arose in reaction to the demands of women of colour, in an effort to tackle issues that the white feminist movement ignored, especially those issues that are fundamental to the everyday lives of women of colour. Racism that Black women encountered when associating with white sisters may have been the wellspring of black womanism and feminism. Abolition of racial, economic, and gender-based discrimination against women of colour in the Third World is, therefore, the most pressing political need of our time. Black women's experiences prove that past, present, and future contributions are legitimate in their battle against gender and racial constructs. By bringing attention to the complicated and valuable past of women of colour, womanism affirms their identity as one to be celebrated in the modern world.

A. Dear Emecheta, Emecheta has gained fame on a global scale for her compelling depictions of women's lives in African culture and, more specifically, in Nigeria. Many consider her to be the preeminent African woman writer of the modern day. Emecheta is widely acknowledged for her role in establishing a strong female protagonist in the male-dominated canon of modern African literature. Along with Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, and Ama Ata Aidoo, she is also said to have helped develop this presence. Salman Rushdie claims that the cultural memory of racism and sexism in the state has been filtered by the prevalent nostalgia in British culture, which occurred less than a decade after the publication of *Second-Class Citizen*. A flurry of film adaptations of novels describing Britain's imperial heyday in the 1980s prompted Rushdie to argue that these adaptations' populist approach is indicative of a broader imperialist nostalgia. According to Rushdie, "there can be little doubt that in

Britain today the refurbishment of the Empire's tarnished image is under way (...) exemplified by the huge success of these fictions, [which] is the artistic counterpart of the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain". Assuming Rushdie is correct in saying that these cultural products tap into the common post-imperial hangover in Britain, the next question is how fiction may better accurately portray the past. One tactic to counter Rushdie's staunch opposition to "Raj revivalism" may be to ignore it altogether, as Owen Hatherley did with his idea of "austerity nostalgia." But Jennifer Wenzel's concept of "anti-imperialist nostalgia" provides a different option to redirect nostalgia away from conservative uses, so it shouldn't be seen as a gauge of cultural forgetting. Instead of just throwing aside cultural artefacts from colonialism, Wenzel lays forth a complicated ethics of reassessing them for political ends. His recommendation is to not do it:

An anti-imperialist nostalgic longing may be defined as a desire for a nonexistent ideal or state of affairs, accompanied by an acute awareness that the desired outcome represents a "ways it could have gone" that ultimately never materialised. When you realise this, you have to face the things that made that future a failure. Doing so might either "immunise" you against similar forces in the present or make you fight back against them.

This idea presents a way to reread the past critically so that it might be useful in addressing the political problems of today. This restatement turns nostalgia into a potent tool for critiquing the past. Antiimperialist nostalgia goes beyond the sadness of broken relationships to find hidden fundamental value in political undertakings that are often dismissed as insignificant, damaged, or incomplete. Like Brown, Wenzel tries to be fair in his article criticism of identity politics without ignoring the arguments made by its many proponents. To show the "cognizance" required for an antiimperialist nostalgic view of the welfare state's legacy, one must focus on the stark contradictions between the program's rhetorical promise of universal social protection and the sobering reality of systemic gender and racial discrimination it actually enacted. If a revamped welfare state is serious about helping migrant women like Adah, the only way it can avoid making things worse is to prioritise change, according to Second-Class Citizen's extension.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the literary works of Nadine Gordimer serve as striking witnesses to the intricate interaction of racial and gender concerns in the setting of South Africa during the apartheid era. In order to shed light on the tremendous impact that prejudice and oppression have, Gordimer deftly navigates the complicated web of societal institutions, power dynamics, and human connections via the novels and short tales that she has written. The narratives written by Gordimer not only shed light on the outward efforts against apartheid, but they also dig into the interior problems that individuals face as they struggle with their identities, allegiances, and moral choices. It is clear that she is examining racial injustice via the lives of her characters, with a particular focus on the dehumanising impacts of segregation. She does this while also drawing attention to gender norms and the difficulties that women encounter, which contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of oppression. Contributions are made to the society from which the characters of Gordimer's works receive their identities, as their "self" grows via social interaction and conflicts. With the help of sociology, the scholar has gained a better understanding of the social realities depicted in Gordimer's writings. Love, politics, gender, and identity are some of the most significant themes explored by Nadine Gordimer.

## References

- [1] Contemporary Novelists. London: St. James Press, 1976.
- [2] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto, 1986.
- [3] Gordimer, N. (1981). *July's People*. New York: The Viking Press.
- [4] Cloete, M.J. "A Study of Identity in Post-Apartheid South African English Literature: The Pickup by Nadine Gordimer." *Literator* 26.1 (April 2005): 48-67.
- [5] Emecheta, Buchi. "Feminism with a Small 'f.'" *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden: Blackwell, 2007. 551-8. 1988. Print.
- [6] Dr. D C Punse, "Apartheid In Nadine Gordimer's Novel", *International Indexed & Referred Research Journal*, August 2012, Vol II\*ISSUE35, ppp 82-83
- [7] \_\_\_\_\_. *Second-Class Citizen*. 1974. New York: George Braziller, 1975. Print
- [8] Brien, Conor Cruise (25 October 1979) : "Waiting for Revolution" *The New York Review of Books* Retrieved 16 July 2012.
- [9] Rushdie, Salman. "Outside the Whale." *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. New York: Penguin, 1991. 87-101. 1982. Print.
- [10] Williams, L. (1997). Mariama Ba's *So long a letter* in a women and literature course. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 25 (3-4), 139-149
- [11] Cooke, John, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private lives/Public Landscape*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Up. 1985