

Dual Resistance Faced by the Champions of Social Justice  
in Gordimer's *A Chip of Glass Ruby*

Dr. Divija Kumari

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Nadine Gordimer

Courtesy: <https://artafricamagazine.org/outpouring-of-tributes-to-nadine-gordimer/>

**Abstract**

Nadine Gordimer's works often provide a deep insight into the lives of the people, who struggled and suffered, to oppose the injustices created by the government during Apartheid in South Africa. Though the characters and situations in her works are imaginary, yet to a great extent they are based on her real life observations of the life in South Africa during Apartheid. Her works artistically bring out the predicament of those, who extended their support to the cause of social justice during Apartheid in South Africa. Through the present short-story, *A Chip of Glass Ruby*, Gordimer has showcased the predicament of an Indian lady Mrs. Zanip Bamjee, who supports the protest of the Blacks against the then Government in South Africa, by extending her help indirectly, in more than one way. But by extending her help to the Blacks, she not only finds resistance from the then Government officials but from her own husband too.

**Keywords:**

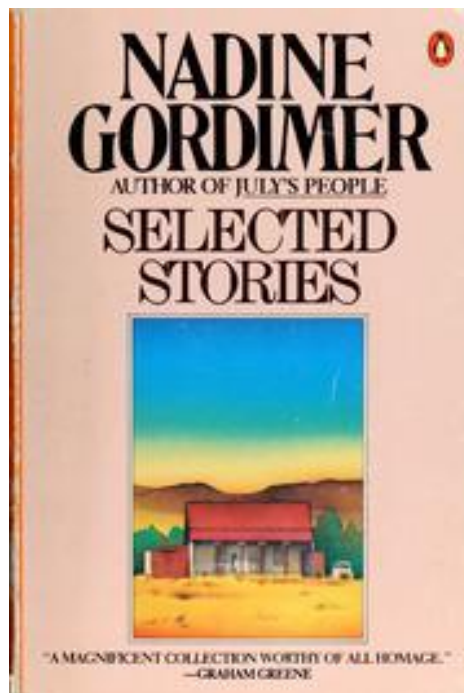
Nadine Gordimer, Resistance, Apartheid, Compassion, Predicament, *A Chip of Glass Ruby*.

**Nadine Gordimer's Fiction**

Literature is said to be a mirror of the society. The Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer's fiction, fully affirms this view. Her fiction vividly reflects the society, divided along racial lines, in South Africa during Apartheid. Through the lives of the fictional characters in her novels and short-stories, Gordimer underlines the predicaments of the warriors of the cause of social justice during Apartheid. Although the works, settings, characters and situations of Gordimer's works are fictional yet they are based on her first-hand observation of the South-African way of life. It is for this very reason that her works seem to recreate the history of the times.

**Social Justice**

Although Gordimer has dealt with different themes in her works yet one theme which she takes up time and again is the predicament of those who wish to support the cause of social justice. Living in a country, that was divided along racial lines and the inequality was a graded one, she always realized the fact that the Whites who supported the cause of social justice, had to face opposition and rejection both by the Whites as well as the Non-Whites. Likewise, whenever a Coloured or an Indian tried to fight against the injustices created in the society during Apartheid, he too faced opposition from the Whites as well as from his own community.

***A Chip of Glass Ruby***

Courtesy: <https://archive.org/details/selectedstories00gord>

In the present short-story, *A Chip of Glass Ruby*, Gordimer has showcased the predicament of an Indian lady Mrs. Zanip Bamjee, who supports the protest of the Blacks

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against the then Government in South Africa, by extending her help indirectly, in more than one way. But by extending her help to the Blacks, she not only finds resistance from the then Government officials but from her own husband too.

When Mr. Bamjee married Mrs. Bamjee, she was already a widow with five kids. After his marriage with her, Mr. Bamjee moved into her house and the “Pahad” house became the “Bamjee” house. At the very outset, Mr. Bamjee noticed that his wife wrote minutes of the meetings and he saw that she read the Government Blue Books even while giving suck to her younger child. He considered these activities futile but at that time he didn’t realize that activities of this kind would create trouble for them in future. But when he notices a duplicating machine being brought to their house, he feels ill at ease, as he understands that the machine has been brought for propagating and supporting the fight of the Blacks against the injustices being levied upon them by the Government. Mr. Bamjee shows his resentment when the machine is brought to the house and complains to his wife that she has already taken up the problems of the Indians, living in South Africa, on herself and that she should have nothing to do with the problems of the Blacks.

But Mrs. Bamjee understands very well that the unjust practices of the government cannot come to an end unless all the wronged communities fight together. And therefore she tries to make her husband understand the fact that the problems of all of them were common. When the machine is placed on the dining table, Mr. Bamjee dislikes the idea of the duplicating machine being placed on the dining table. Therefore Mrs. Bamjee has to immediately create a space for it on the side –table. Thus, by deciding to support the Blacks in their fight against discrimination, Mrs. Bamjee not only takes the risk to displease the Government but her husband too.

Mr. Bamjee dislikes and disapproves of his wife’s involvement in the activities of the revolutionaries. He can clearly foresee the consequences of his wife’s support to the Blacks. But rather than repeatedly objecting explicitly, he adopts a policy of indifference. When his wife, started reproducing the leaflets, he didn’t show any interest in knowing what they were about. Likewise, he seldom asked the details about the people who visited their home in his absence. Only once, he asked his wife whether the man who just left their home, was the famous Indian lawyer Dr. Abdul Mohammed Khan or not. Mrs. Bamjee also never displeased her husband by talking about the revolutionaries or discussing their activities. But when her husband asked her if the man who left her home was Dr. Abdul Mohammed Khan, she not only replied in affirmation but related the purpose of his visit as well.

But sometimes, Mr. Bamjee lost his calm and directly expressed his strong dislike for his wife’s involvement in the political activities. On such occasions, Mrs. Bamjee had to face, even the verbal reproach of her husband, for extending her support to the Black revolutionary activities. One such situation gets created when Mr. Bamjee notices that a duplicating machine is brought to their house. Mr. Bamjee loses his calm and asks a question to Mrs. Bamjee, thereby suggesting, that she has already burdened herself with the problems of the Indians living in South Africa and that she should not take the additional burden of the problems of the Blacks. When Mrs. Bamzee replies that the problems of all the communities were common, Mr. Bamzee retorts:

““Don’t tell me that. We don’t have to carry passes; let the natives protest

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against passes on their own, there are millions of them. Let them go ahead with it.”(SFOTC 36)

Likewise, when the duplicating machine is placed on the dining table, Mr. Bamjee tauntingly retorts: “A fine thing to have on the table where we eat” (SFOTC 36). In order to please her husband, Mrs. Bamjee immediately starts creating a space for the machine on the side-board and says: “It’s going to go nicely on the sideboard!” (SFOTC 37)

Mrs. Bamjee has to face the anger of her husband again, when one day he returns home in the evening and finds the famous lawyer, Dr. Abdul Mohammed Khan, leaving his home. His anger was occasioned neither due to any kind of suspicion on his wife’s fidelity nor on account of his wife’s negligence in executing her household duties due to the time spent on meetings and discussions at their home. She never gave him a chance to doubt her fidelity. She did sit with men, but only till her work demanded. As soon as her discussion was over, the visitors left her home immediately and she too engrossed herself in her household responsibilities immediately. Mrs. Bamjee perfectly knew how to balance her revolutionary work and domestic duty. As such, she never gave Mr. Bamjee a chance to complain that she was supporting the movement of the Blacks- at the cost of the family. The reason of his getting angry on finding the lawyer Dr. Khan leaving his home, therefore, was that he strongly disapproved of his wife’s involvement in the revolutionary movement of the Blacks. Therefore, when Mr. Bamjee notices Dr. Khan leaving his house, he asks his wife, “What for do you want to get mixed up with these killings and stonings and I don’t know what? Congress should keep out of it. Isn’t it enough with the Group Areas?” (SFOTC 38-39) But Mrs. Bamjee calmed her husband down by reminding him that he was against the Group Areas Act as well, until his own mother was moved out of her home. By reminding this incident, Mrs. Bamjee seems to suggest that one cannot keep waiting for one’s turn to get harmed and that injustices of the Government should be opposed irrespective of the consideration- as to who was being affected and who was not.

When Mr. Bamjee heard in the market that the famous Indian lawyer Dr. Khan, who used to visit his home, for having discussions with his wife, got arrested, he came home with a bitter feeling in his heart, but when he found his wife preparing a new dress for her child, his anger got released and he decided not to give air to his anger.

But the most severe outbreak of his anger dawns, when two Coloured policemen come to arrest Mrs. Bamjee in the middle of the night. The fear that was lurking in Mr. Bamjee’s heart for a very long period of time had finally turned into reality. For a long period of time, he wanted his wife to understand, that she was risking her own safety and the happiness of her own family for the cause of other people and finally his apprehensions had turned into reality. Unable to control his anger, he yelled at his wife:

“There you are!’ he shouted, standing away from her. ‘That’s what you’ve got for it. Didn’t I tell you? Didn’t I? That’s the end of it now. That’s the finish. That’s what it’s come to.’”(SFOTC 41)

Mrs. Bamjee had always extended her support to the movement of the Blacks despite being fully aware of the fact that neither the government nor her husband will ever approve of it. But except for a momentary trembling of her hands while opening the doors of her home,

she displayed great strength and dignity, when the cops came to arrest her. Even when she is going to get imprisoned, it is she who tries to instill strength in her husband. When Mr. Bamjee grumbles and asks how will he be able to manage without her, she consoles and soothes him by saying, “It’ll be all right. Girlie will help. The big children can manage”(SFOTC 41-42).

Mr. Bamjee considered his wife’s involvement in the struggle of the Blacks no more than a foolish act on her part. Even her arrest couldn’t mitigate his anger for her:

“For the first few weeks he never spoke of her. There was the feeling, in the house, that he had wept and raged at her, that boulders of reproach had thundered down upon her absence, and yet he had said not one word.”(SFOTC 43)

Even when the neighbours and the relatives came to meet Mr. Bamjee in order to console him after the arrest of Mrs. Bamjee, he is not able to tame his anger and he pours out his heart in front of them: “Ah, yes, yes, you can see how I am –you see what has been done to me. Nine children, and I am on the cart all day. I get home at seven or eight. What are you to do? What can people like us do?” (SFOTC 44)

When he comes to know that, like the other political prisoners, his wife has also been on hunger strike since the last few days, he feels very bad from within. Despite his sincere efforts to understand the motives behind his wife’s involvement in the protest of the Blacks, he fails to arrive at satisfactory conclusions. He keeps on wondering and speculating the reasons behind his wife’s interest in getting involved in the political matters like that:

“‘What for?’ She was not a modern woman who cut her hair and wore short skirts. He had married a good plain Moslem woman who bore children and stamped her own chillies.”(SFOTC 45)

When the hunger strike taken up by the political prisoners continued in the second week, Mr. Bamjee started muttering:

“‘For a crowd of natives who’ll smash our shops and kill us in our houses when their time comes.’ ‘She will starve herself to death there.’ ‘She will die there.’ ‘Devils who will burn and kill us.’”(SFOTC 45)

Mr. Bamjee had noticed the notable difference between other Indian women and his wife. He realized that other women would never involve themselves in such risky affairs. Before the arrest of Mrs. Bamjee, he had seen her drinking tea with black women in her own home, which no other Indian woman would have done. He was surprised to see this, as no other Indian woman would like to have tea with the native women. These qualities present in Mrs. Bamjee, evoked mixed feelings for her, in the heart of Mr. Bamjee. On the one hand, he felt very bad that she was risking her life and her family life for the Blacks. On the other hand, he was filled with respect for her, when people of high social repute like Dr. Abdul Mohammed Khan appreciated her. But he was always left wondering and speculating the actual driving force- that compelled a simple and ordinary woman like Mrs. Bamjee, who desired neither name nor fame; neither male-friends nor lime-light; neither recognition nor money, to stake her life and freedom for the cause and the suffering of others.

It took him a very long time to understand that although his wife was an ordinary woman, yet she had an extraordinary compassion in her. She was deeply filled with extraordinary kindness in her. He realized that even he had married this ordinary looking woman because he too was attracted towards the qualities of head and heart present in her. She cared for everyone including her husband, her children, her daughter's in-laws, her neighbours, her relatives and all human beings in general, irrespective of their ethnic group or nationality. Mrs. Bamjee's eldest daughter Fatima, describes her nature in the most appropriate words towards the end of the story:

““Oh, but don't you see?” The girl said. ‘It's because she doesn't want anybody to be left out. It's because she always remembers; remembers everything - people without somewhere to live, hungry kids, boys who can't get educated - remembers all the time. That's how Ma is.’”(SFOTC 47)

It was true that Mrs. Bamjee extended her support to the movement of the Blacks. But it was equally true that she did so by putting so many things at stake. Her husband was a hawker-who sold fruit and vegetable in order to run the family. He left early in the morning and came late at night. Mrs. Bamjee had nine children, out of which only one girl was married. She had the responsibility of looking after eight children. The valuable time which she could have given to her eight children was given to the revolutionary activities. She is constantly under pressure to create a balance between her work as a revolutionary and her duty as a wife and mother. Moreover, she has to tax herself by working late till night. For instance, when the duplicating machine arrives, she works late till night to reproduce the leaflets. She constantly keeps switching to and fro from domestic duties to her work as an activist and vice-versa and that too in an absolutely calm and composed manner.

By involving herself in these activities, she also runs the risk of being suspected not only by the South African Government but her own husband too. So many men come to her home for discussion in her husband's absence. She has to always take care to keep her meetings with these men strictly formal.

Thus, Mrs. Bamjee had to pay a huge price for her deeply compassionate nature. As a champion of social justice, she had to face a dual resistance throughout- resistance from the Government as well as resistance from her own husband. And through the character and fate of Mrs. Zani Bamjee, Nadine Gordimer seems to suggest, that this was precisely the fate of all those people living in South Africa during Apartheid, who cared for all and who empathised with all.

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