

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 2 February 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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South Africa's History Acts Upon Nadine Gordimer

Robert Green had once remarked:

“Finally, when the history of the Nationalist Governments from 1948 to the end comes to be written, Nadine Gordimer’s shelf of novels will provide the future historian with all the evidence needed to assess the price that has been paid.” (Green156)

What Green had felt about Nadine Gordimer’s novels is perfectly true about her short stories too. Her works are believed to have “a massive historical and political significance as a developing and shifting response to events in modern South Africa, spanning over forty years and reaching into six decades, from the 1940s to the 1990s” (Dominic 2). In the Introduction to the *Selected Stories*, Gordimer has herself acknowledged that in her writing ‘she acts upon her society, while, in this relationship of mutual influence’ (Dominic 3), history acts upon her. In her own words:

“The creative act is not pure .History evidences

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it. Ideology demands it. Society exacts it. ” (Tanner 3)

Oral History – a Short Story of Nadine Gordimer

The short stories of Nadine Gordimer are known and appreciated for the artistic and touching exhibition of the problems and compromises faced by the racially marginalized people of South Africa. “Oral History” is one such story which figures in the collection *A Soldier’s Embrace*.

The story, as the very title suggests, projects the point of view of black Africans whose oral history it seems to relate. It has the privilege of being one of the seven short stories filmed in 1982 to be broadcast on television.

The story is an explicit criticism of apartheid and it reveals how racial segregation can corrupt the “superior race” and victimize the “inferior” one. Probably what leaves the readers ill at ease after going through the whole story is their realization that the story is truth, not fiction. The story, which is the last one in the collection, ‘has preserved and concentrated its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time’. (Seyhan 41)

Suggestive Title

As the very title suggests, the story actually recreates the history of South Africa. Gordimer has carefully used the word ‘oral’ in the title to suggest that it is not one story but the whole experience undergone and shared by the tribal people generation after generation in Africa. The title “Oral History” also suggests a branch of study in history, where it not only refers to folklore, gossip, hear-say or rumor, but is defined by historian Donald A. Ritchie as a systematic documentation ‘to uncover the past and preserve it for the future.’ He suggests that,

“Oral history derives its value not from resisting the unexpected, but from relishing it. By adding an ever wider range of voices to the story, oral history does not simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex and more interesting.” (Ritchie 13)

A Story of Common People

Stories have always had a special appeal for listeners and readers. People love to tell and hear stories. It is our memory which often organizes to take the shape of a story. The stories of rich and powerful people like Kings, Politicians, Sports men, Actors and Social Workers often find places in magazines, columns of newspapers and shelves of libraries.

But it is the day to day experience of common people which is much more important for an oral historian and this is precisely what Gordimer has done in this particular story.

New Historicism

“Oral History” is one of the most touching stories created by her. When the American critic Stephen Greenblatt used the term New-historicism for an approach that advocated the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts it was perhaps for such stories as this that he used this term. New-historicism emphasizes the power-structures in the state, the patriarchal structures in the society and the effects of colonization as suggested by Michel Foucault.

“Oral History,” very subtly takes up all these issues. Although another story “Town and Country Lovers” in the same collection of stories, *A Soldier’s Embrace* also brings out the fatal nuances of the Apartheid era and focuses on the doubly marginalized status of women in the colonial South Africa, yet it is “Oral History” which has a more lasting appeal and which keeps haunting the mind of the sensible reader, long after he has gone through it.

Issues Dealt with in the Story

The story manages to dwell upon a number of issues like the divide and rule policy of the whites, the war of Zimbabwe, the interpersonal relationships, the patriarchal set-up with men having a legitimate right to have more than one wife, the hierarchy of power-structure, the racial discrimination and the psychological upheavals going through the mind of the protagonist and the unrest among the youth and ultimately the sense of guilt and redemption through suicide.

The Setting

The setting of the story is a village, Dilolo. At the very outset, the omniscient third person narrator reveals that the house of the chief is different from that of other people’s homes and it is the only house made of brick, the rest of them having thatched roofs and mud for their walls. The luxurious life of the whites and the privileges bestowed on the chiefs of the village are quite evident through the fact that cars were also given to the chiefs. The divide and rule policy of the colonizers is even more apparent in the statement that the chiefs were usually given regular stipends by the government.

Historic Context

The new-historicist tends to understand and comprehend a work through its historical context. At the same time they believe in “the historicity of texts and textuality of history” (Montrose 20) as suggested by Louis Montrose. The present story is also deeply rooted in its historic context. It is set against the backdrop of the war of Zimbabwe and

the situation created in the story is that the natives have revolted against the oppressors and the government has decided to put such revolutionaries and their supporters in prisons and a curfew is imposed in the late hours of the day. If anybody is found roaming towards or around borders, he is shot dead there and then. A huge unrest prevailed among the people of the village. As the narrator remarks:

“The young go away: once it was to the mines,
now- the radio said-it was over the border to
learn how to fight” (Gordimer 135).

A Text Situated within the Totality of the Context and Institutions

While defining new-historicism, M.H. Abrams says that “a text is conceived as a discourse which, although it may seem to present, or reflect, an external reality, in fact consists of what are called representations, that is, verbal formations which are ideological products or cultural constructs of the historical conditions specific to an era.”(Abrams191) He further explains the term by adding that ‘new-historicists conceive of a literary text as situated within the totality of the institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes.’(Abrams 189)

Cultural Practices Depicted in the Story

Gordimer has also given a peep into the then cultural practices of the tribal people in the story. “Oral History” brings out the customs and the culture of the people in a very dynamic way. The Church of the Mopane, the white flag flowing after the funeral service of a person, the arrival of the protestant missionaries in the village, the combining of the old rituals to the new ones for handing over the dead to their ancestors -- give a peep into the culture of the people of Dilolo. The christening of the children in consultation with the priests also refers to the customs prevalent in the village. The superstitious notions and beliefs of the people are highlighted through the ways in which the prophecies were made:

“The children were baptized with names chosen
by portent in consultation between the mother and
an old man who read immutable fate in the fall of
small bones cast like the dice from a horn cup.” (Gordimer 135)

Relating Events from History

That Gordimer has narrated the story as if she is relating events from history are evident by the very way she chooses her words and the manner in which she frames her sentences. For instance:

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“It is also the way of the tribe to which the clan belongs, from Matadi in the west to Mombasa in the east, from Entebbe in the north to Empangene in south, that everyone is welcome at a beer-drink.”(Gordimer 135)

Gordimer is careful enough to refer to the fact that on both the sides of the village, every person is having a dark complexion and most of them share the same language and customs. The policy and the steps taken by the government for crushing and suppressing the revolutionaries are also referred to highlight the terror created by the instruments of the government:

“He told the chief of things that were happening not far from the village; not far at all .The road that passed five kilometers away had been blown up. ‘Someone plants land-mines in the road and as soon as we (whites) repair it they put them there again...They wreck our vehicles and kill people’” (Gordimer 138).

The Social Hierarchy

The hierarchy of the less privileged, privileged and more privileged is suggested through the behaviour of the black soldier towards the chief and by the submissive attitude of the chief towards the white soldier. The divide and rule policy of the administrators is further exposed by the way they create terror in the minds of the blacks in general and the chief in particular:

“They will kill you, too-burn your huts, all of you -if you let them stay with you” (Gordimer 138).

The economic disparity between the colonizers and the natives and further among the natives themselves is evident by the reference to the big steel watch on the wrist of the chief, the big house he owned and the stipend he received from the government. If the whites had the authority over the blacks, there were also some blacks who held their authority over other blacks. The Chief’s wife, for instance, is quite happy to report her husband about the coming of an Army Patrol Land Rover to inspect the village. To quote her words: “The government is coming to see you” (Gordimer 137).

The society observes patriarchy and women are given little importance. The Chief himself has got many wives. Women are doubly marginalized and they are not considered wise. When the white soldier threatened the villagers that they might be killed; the latest wife of the Chief inquired the reason for his threatening thus. But her husband got angry with her inquisitiveness and rebuked her:

“You talk about things you don’t know.
Don’t speak for the sake of making noise” (Gordimer 138).

In yet another incident, the Chief goes to his mother’s hut. Although the mother of the Chief is wiser than Chief himself yet the Chief doesn’t pay any heed to her advice and lands himself in trouble. It is she who suggests her son that he should not inquire people about the whereabouts of their sons:

“Do you know where your sons are?
[...]
‘Good. You can be glad of all that. But
Don’t ask other people about theirs” (Gordimer 139).

She, although old, is the one who doesn’t want her son to betray their clan. But the Chief went to the army post, waited for the white soldier like ‘a beggar’ and gave the information that plenty of revolutionaries have started intruding in the village. When the Chief returns to his village, he is dumb-founded to find his village blown-up. Ironically, it was not the act of revolutionaries but that of the government. The whole village was destroyed and the government didn’t spare even a single person in the village, not even Chief’s mother and wife. Both of them had also become the victims of the operation carried out by the government and this brutal step was the outcome of the report of the Chief.

Chinua Achebe’s Okonkwo

The character of the Chief reminds the readers of the character Okonkwo created by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. Both loved and respected their respective clans and tribes while they were yet alive and both eventually committed suicide. While Okonkwo committed suicide because his people failed him; the Chief hanged himself because he failed his people. But the pain and the psychological upheavals they underwent were common.

Selective History and Darkness

Hegel in 1830 observed that “there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness [...] and darkness is not a subject of history.”(Benjamin 9) Gordimer has made use of history as the subject of this story in an exemplary manner. She believed with Karl Jaspers that community is a historical concept. In her essay, “The Novel and the Nation in South Africa,” she agrees with Jaspers that:

Community is a historical concept. Each separate community is unique, rooted in an unfathomable past that has determined it, and that has been handed down through oral teaching, books, usages, customs,

habits, and above all, through the institutions of the family and the religion.(Killam 34)

Anatole Broyard has rightly observed that, “Since Nadine Gordimer writes more knowingly about South Africa than anyone else, this may be history in the making that we are reading.” Gordimer has faithfully related the community life of the village Dilolo in this short story and through this imaginary village, she has actually related the history, the customs, the nature of institutions like family and religion of Africa, thereby making the story a microcosm of the life of people in the continent at large.

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