

**The Hostile World of the Oppressors and the Oppressed in  
Select Short Stories of Nadine Gordimer**

**Dr. B. Sudha Sai and Srinivas Abburi**

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**Abstract**

Nadine Gordimer is almost alone of the writers opposed to apartheid, writing from within South Africa, and at the same time striking because of her preference for private subjects. She has tried to deal with the distortions in personal relationships caused by the apartheid society, from the privileged side of the colour bar. Her stories have a direct appeal to the readers and almost all describe the hardships of South Africans living in conditions of manifest social inequality. There is also a direct involvement with the lives and actions of women in situations of physical and moral difficulties in her stories. The dominant subject in all her writings usually is the inner struggle of a mind in a state of rapid transformation. Her writings even have relevance to the present world outside South Africa. In the present article, there is an attempt made to deal with the hostile world of the oppressors and the oppressed in some of the short stories of Nadine Gordimer.

Nadine Gordimer, the winner of the 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature is known for her portrayal of conflicts, contradictions of South Africa. Through her works that have poignantly explored for more than 40 years the system of segregation on the grounds of race, she has benefitted her country to dismantle the system of Apartheid. Though she passed away in the year 2014, according to one of the noted journals, The New Yorker, her presence can still be felt through her short stories. The prolific writer has published 21 collections of short stories which have further won her a place of prominence in the literary canon, and the admiration of millions of readers. Her entire collection of work focused on the South African apartheid debate, and later on censorship and HIV. She can therefore be considered as one of the world's most powerful anti-apartheid voices.

Gordimer was born during the time of apartheid in the small mining town of Springs outside Johannesburg, South Africa. As it is racial segregation mandated by law in South Africa, from an early age she sees black people marginalized and treated poorly by the whites. Further she has also seen the rights of the blacks are continually eroded while those of the whites grow stronger and stronger. Thus, right from the beginning she is unusually sensitive to the South African landscape. She also finds her basis of her society to be not European but African. She further

considers herself not as a white South African but as an African and molds herself by African culture and history.

One of the important factors which helps one in understanding her literature is that she is almost alone of the writers opposed to apartheid, writing from within South Africa, and at the same time striking because of her preference for private subjects. She has tried to deal with the distortions in personal relationships caused by the apartheid society, from the privileged side of the colour bar. Her stories have a direct appeal to the readers and almost all describe the hardships of South Africans living in conditions of manifest social inequality. There is also a direct involvement with the lives and actions of women in situations of physical and moral difficulties in her stories. The dominant subject in all her writings usually is the inner struggle of a mind in a state of rapid transformation. Her writings even have relevance to the present world outside South Africa. In the present article, there is an attempt made to deal with the hostile world of the oppressors and the oppressed in some of the short stories of Nadine Gordimer.

The first story 'Is there nowhere else where we can meet' deals with the conflict that has become the way of social relations between white and black South Africans during nineteen seventies. The story is about a young white woman, who finding herself alone in a deserted lot, encounters a ragged black man who robs her handbag and a parcel after a brief tussle. The psychological effect after the violent encounter on the lady and her reaction towards the world around her are described vividly by the writer. After the attack the young lady's calmness is shattered. It is beautifully reflected in her descriptions of the landscape, how it is experienced by the character before and after the encounter. The same calm and familiar surroundings become cruel and hostile for the lady. The lady after reaching the suburban streets feels rather alienated, lonely and uncertain. The violent attack has in a certain way crippled the lady and finally she doesn't feel relieved. However in the end of the story Gordimer manages to establish a fascinating identification between the white lady and the poor black man as both of them are victims of the society in which they live.

The second story 'The Train from Rhodesia' deals with the exploitation of the blacks by the whites. The central encounter takes place between a young white couple and a poor black weaver. The couple meets the craftsman at a country station during a brief train stop. After watching the wooden carvings from the window, the lady happens to like a lion carving. But she gives up the idea of buying the carving as the price told by the black appears to be quite high. After sometime the white man is able to buy the lion carving for a lower price from the carver as the train moves off. Surprisingly when the husband presents the lion carving to his wife as a token of love, she spurns his actions by saying that he should have taken the carving decently as per the offer initially made by the poor man. He shouldn't have waited for him to run after the train with it and finally buy for a very less price. It is interesting that Gordimer expresses her sense of disgust at the situation through the response of the lady. Initially the lady rejects the man's act of exploitation and arbitrary will of white supremacy. Later while thinking about the skill that might

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have gone into the carving of the lion, she feels an acute sense of shame, emptiness and incompleteness. However the writer in the end manages to establish a link between a white woman and a black man. Rather both of them share some form of unfair treatment. The story in fact penetrates the workings of the apartheid state by describing the awful way in which the blacks are deceived, repressed and oppressed by the white minority government.

In the third story "A Soldier's Embrace" belonging to the period of nineteen eighties, the writer has portrayed that even when the blacks and white activists work together and succeed, their success inexplicably segregates them. Here is a white liberal celebrating the liberation of an African state from a white minority government. The lady on her way home is caught in a jubilant crowd of citizens, white colonial soldiers and black guerrilla fighters who are enjoying themselves. The lady tries to internalize the pressure of the apartheid by using racially coded language. Actually, the lady and her lawyer husband have defended the black activists and worked with the blacks for just such liberation. The experience seems to be the perfect image of the new state. At this moment one comes across a woman caught symbolically in the flow of history between the two opposing male representatives of the society. This is a tenuous accord between these forces and the woman caught between them and then the embrace breaks. One in fact gets to know that the lady from time to time keeps returning to the image of embrace.

At the beginning the lady feels that the white soldier and the black soldier are the two sides of the same coin. As the story proceeds, the image of embrace appears to the lady like a poster peeling off the wall. This indicates the development of new politics as the new state is formed and the old white minority government is taken over by the new one. The lady's analysis of the image of embrace shows us the repressive conditions under which the blacks survive. After the liberation, however, their black friends are cool. They are engaged in setting up a government independent of any white advice. Gordimer also gives a picture of the society, which is a mixture of both good and bad. Even the most well-meaning whites are bound to go elsewhere. At this point one can never forget the hypocrite butcher in the story who happens to be a white. He takes the opportunity to exploit the poor blacks by selling meat for a higher price. Even other snobs and opportunists like the butcher are made to leave the state. And as the couple finally decides to move on, Gordimer tries to bring home the point that the so called liberal whites haven't been able to break down the racial categories. History will continue after the broken embrace, but the future for everybody is unclear and uncertain. As the couple drives away, the white lady thinks, "the right words would not come again, whatever they were, she left them behind."

The theme of the fourth story "Which New Era Would That Be" is about hypocrisy, exploitation and a variety of stresses shown on the commonplace blacks by the power maniac whites. It represents for Gordimer the mark of her transition to adopting the black stand point on social attitude. In the story, the host, Jake Alexander, the half-white and a group of blacks are visited by a young liberal white lady, Jennifer and a white friend of the host called Alister. The group after getting introduced to each other, starts talking about social and political climate of South Africa. The building in which the host lives is named as New Era Building and the title of the story is symbolic of the sense of uncertainty prevalent in the society. As the story progresses, one is given a clear picture of the hostility between the world of oppressors and the oppressed. One

is also told about the effects of racial suppression on the psyche and the emotional reactions of the blacks. No white activist, no matter how often is jailed, will ever be black. Gradually one comes to know that the so-called liberal, intellectual, dark-haired Jennifer refuses to believe an anecdote about a black being the victim of whites' hypocrisy. When Maxie, a black friend of the host, says about the refusal of a white host to share a meal with him, to whom the white host offered a drink, Jennifer couldn't believe it "as if this were a problem to be solved psychologically." Jennifer begins to internalize the pressures of apartheid by saying that Maxie doesn't have an African accent" as some Africans have, even if they get rid of the African thing." Then Maxie quotes another incident where he is mistaken to be a European, over the phone, by a white lady and how the same lady gets terrified on seeing after a week. Finally, Jennifer's answer "it's hard to be punished for not being black" shows a considerable amount of bitter irony. Gordimer ends the story with a positive note as she has the feeling that a time will come, when both blacks and whites will forget the social division and begin to live together.

Finally, the fifth story "Six Feet of the Country" talks about the ill-treatment of women in the society. While trying to go deep into the problem, Gordimer says that it is the patriarchal attitude prevalent in the society which extends support to the iniquities of the apartheid state. The white narrator of the story is a prosperous Johannesburg businessman and it is full of examples of the indifference and scant esteem he has for his wife. Right at the beginning of the story one comes to know that he treats his wife with smugness and complacency. The expressions used by him clearly portray a degrading and demeaning picture of a woman, in the role of a wife. The hypocrite narrator says in a very calm way that they have an successful marriage without the slightest hint that the reason for this may in part be due to his own failings. The cruel husband's bleak opinion about his wife is expressed in his description of her efforts at being both a farmer and an actress. His continual disparagement of his wife has its effect on their unsuccessful married life. It is also because of the inflated form of male self regard with which he considers himself and his relationship with his wife. His economic superiority helps in playing a dominant role in their life style. As the story progresses, one hears that a black Rhodesian man is found dead in one of the black servant's rooms. Further the dead-man's brother asks the white narrator whether the dead body can be brought from Johannesburg to the farm for burial. And then, throughout the series of events which lead up to the grim revelation at the funeral that the white authorities had sent them the wrong body, the narrator is repeatedly coaxed along by his wife and the black servant, to get the dead body returned for the burial.

Towards the end of the story one gets to know that Lerice is aware of the fact that she is being wronged and looked down upon by her husband. This can be made out through her estrangement from her husband and her feeling of a sense of revulsion at the series of events of the burial fiasco. At the end of the story the wife spurns the husband and all that he has come to represent at this point of the story. One gets to know that silence is not the basic quality which defines a good marriage. At the beginning of the story the narrator has the opposite kind of feelings when he says, "you seem to rattle about so much within a marriage like ours. You long to hear nothing but a deep, satisfying silence when you sound marriage." But the silence which he gets in his marriage is because he has an estranged wife who turns away from him.

After going through some of the short stories, one finds there is affection for her homeland, its people, epic landscapes and strong past. This is juxtaposed with an examination of the devastating psychological effects of political persecution on the lives of ordinary South Africans that add moral force and imaginary richness to her stories. It can also be said that her stories are testament to her belief in the redemptive power of humanity. For her, it is the ability to overcome what she has called ‘the violence of pain,’ though the pain is inflicted by the state. Above all, she believed that if the individual is brave and willing enough, will be able to triumph against seemingly insurmountable odds. Thus, one can finally say that her short stories could successfully portray that a writer can be the mouthpiece of a time, a spokesperson for a crusade, and a tireless examiner of moral and psychological truth.

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