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## Discriminated Even in Death: Blacks in Nadine Gordimer's "Six Feet of the Country"

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● **Nadine Gordimer**

<http://gordimer.davidmelvinjr.com/>

### Gordimer's Short Stories

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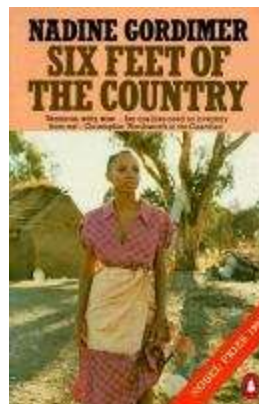
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Gordimer's short stories at once capture the interest of the readers and transport them into the South African way of life. As Clingman holds, "Gordimer's short stories, while often rooted in an identifiable social world, turn in general on human intricacies of a psychological or emotional nature...." (*Head* 162). Usually Gordimer's short stories focus on a single concern and generally she picks up just one thread from the pattern of life of South Africa. But some stories address more than one problem concurrently. "Six Feet of the Country" (1956) is one such story, which takes up multifarious issues related to apartheid in South Africa. Perhaps it is for this very reason that Head considers this story as "one of Gordimer's best stories" (*Head* 172).

### **Exploring the Theme of Maltreatment of Blacks**



Gordimer has repeatedly and tirelessly explored the theme of maltreatment of blacks in her fiction. Through her writing, she has laid bare all sorts of discriminations against the blacks in their day to day life. Through her story, "Six Feet of the Country," she has made efforts to expose the inconsiderateness of the whites in authority, who become an instrument of discrimination against blacks, even after their death. The blacks, as the story suggests, are denied even six feet of the country, for burial at the hands of their relatives.

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The story revolves around very few characters. It takes up the life of a white couple that stays in a farm house, some miles away from Johannesburg. Lerice and her husband keep black servants for their assistance. However, things get complicated, when one of the servant Petrus' brother, comes to stay with him, in search of a job. Since Petrus' brother was an illegal immigrant from Rhodesia, therefore, Petrus' family and friends had to conceal his presence and they had to keep him underground. But soon after his arrival, Petrus' brother dies of Pneumonia. The servants feel obliged to inform the master, who in turn informs the authorities, who take the dead body for postmortem. When the servants bring the dead body back for burial, they realize, to their utter disappointment that the corpse has been replaced.

Apparently, the story seems to deal with a very simple mistake committed by the white authorities. Yet it brings to surface, many other issues related with the identity of races, discrimination, law, poverty and culture.

### **South African Politics and Laws**

The very first characteristic of South African politics and laws, which the story throws light upon, is the fact that every black citizen was forced to carry a pass or permit with him. The Group Areas Act prohibited the free movement of the natives from one place to another without the pass or permit issued by the government. Without that particular pass or permit, an individual was not allowed to stay at the place of his choice. Being an illegal immigrant from Rhodesia, Petrus' brother was not legally allowed to stay at Johannesburg. But the scarcity of money and quest for job drove him to his brother's place. But although he was not feeling well and was suffering from pneumonia, his family members felt scared of consulting any doctor and of

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informing their master. It was only when the man died, that the servants felt obliged to disclose the fact to their masters, as it was not possible to cover up the fact any longer.

The story uncovers the harsh reality that the South African laws often became a villain for the natives. The blacks, in the present story, let their brother die, rather than consulting a physician for his improvement. The absence of pass led to the dearth of medicines and prescriptions. Later, even the father of the dead man is obliged to carry a permit with him in order to attend the funeral of his son. Without that piece of paper in his hand, he too could not imagine to have a last look of his son.

### **Poverty among the Blacks**

Gordimer has also examined the poverty of the blacks in South Africa through the present story. The workers were very poor and they could not live a respectable life. When Petrus demanded the dead body of his brother back, he was told that it would cost twenty pounds. The amount was so high that Petrus could have provided clothes for his whole family for one complete year in that amount. By comparing the cost of the exhumation of the dead body with the amount sufficient for the clothing of Petrus' relations, Gordimer seems to suggest that the poor find it difficult to live decently as well as die graciously.

### **An Empathic White Writer**

Black culture has always fascinated Gordimer. She has often taken up the culture of blacks as the theme of her works. In fact, "one of the truly admirable things about this great woman is the actuality of her engagement with Africa's cultural and political conundrums..."(Gordimer,

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*Pitzer*). But Gordimer has often been challenged for her version and her interpretation of the black culture:

“Many critics have questioned the ethics of Gordimer writing about black South Africans when she is from the dominant culture. However, Gordimer has always maintained that her work is only the view from her own social and cultural perspective, and does not try to communicate any other perspective.”(*Academics’ Web Pages*)

### **Description of Culture**

Through the present story, Gordimer seems to emphasize the faith of black people in the burial rites. Proper funeral of the dead used to be an integral part of the black culture. The black Africans considered the dead ones and the ancestors quite close to the supreme God. The importance of proper burial in black culture is quite evident through the following passage:

“Death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person’s deeper relationship with all of creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death. This is why every person who dies must be given a “correct” funeral, supported by a number of religious ceremonies.”(*Encyclopedia*)

The black people associated many fears with the negligence in performing the burial rites.

They believed:

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“If this is not done, the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable to “live” properly after death and therefore a danger to those who remain alive. It might be argued that “proper” death rites are more a guarantee of protection for the living than to secure a safe passage for the dying. There is ambivalence about attitudes to the recent dead, which fluctuate between love and respect on the one hand and dread and despair on the other, particularly because it is believed that the dead have power over the living.” (*Encyclopedia*)

Petrus, like his fellow Africans, cherishes a strong desire in his mind, to bury his dead brother, by giving him the appropriate burial. It is for this very reason that while his master considers it a total wastage of money on Petrus’ part to arrange twenty pounds to get the dead body of his brother, Petrus is quite determined that his brother should get a proper funeral. And to realize his wish, he arranges the money the very next morning:

“There it was, the twenty pounds, in ones and halves, some creased and folded until they were soft as dirty rags, others smooth and fairly new- Franz’s money, I suppose, and Albert’s, and Dora the cook’s, and Jacob the gardener’s, and God knows who else’s besides, from all the farms and small holdings round about.” (*SFC* 15)

### **An Instrument to Contrast Cultures**

Gordimer seems to make the story an instrument to contrast the white culture and the black one in terms of funeral rites. While the white master considers it a complete wastage of

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money on Petrus' part to take the burden of twenty pounds on himself, for one who is already dead, Petrus considers the interment even more precious than money. Petrus' master gets irritated and tries to restrain himself from assisting Petrus financially. He believes:

“Certainly I should not offer it to him myself. Twenty pounds- or anything else within reason, for that matter-I would have spent without grudging it on doctors or medicines that might have helped the boy when he was alive. Once he was dead, I had no intention of encouraging Petrus to throw away, on a gesture, more than he spent to clothe his whole family in a year.”(*SFC* 14)

Thus, while for his master, it was nothing but a gesture, for Petrus, it was something which had religious and emotional connotations. Petrus' master feels “an irritation at the waste, the uselessness of this sacrifice by people so poor.” He reflects:

“Just like the poor everywhere, I thought, who stint themselves the decencies of life in order to ensure themselves the decencies of death. So incomprehensible to people like Lerice and me, who regard life as something to be spent extravagantly and, if we think about death at all, regard it as the final bankruptcy.” (*SFC* 15)

Thus while the master seems to embody a rational attitude, his servant appears to represent the emotional and cultural conditioning of the black Africans. Not only Petrus but his father also represents black culture, and he rushes to Petrus' dwellings in no time, to attend the funeral. Just

like Petrus, he too willingly takes up the expenses of the journey and seems to foster and promote the African notions. For Petrus and his father a funeral was something that could not and should not be avoided:

“African funerals are community affairs in which the whole community feels the grief of the bereaved and shares in it. The purpose of the activities preceding the funeral is to comfort, encourage, and heal those who are hurting.”(Encyclopedia)

### **Focus on the Funeral – Crisis in the Story**

Gordimer has provided very vivid description of the proceedings of the funeral ceremony of the black community, as observed by the owner of the farm. By providing the details through a white man’s eye, she seems to wash her hands off the responsibility of misrepresenting the culture of the natives. Petrus’ white master observes:

“Petrus, Franz, Albert and the old father from Rhodesia hoisted it (the dead body) on their shoulders and the procession moved on, on foot.” (*SFC* 16)

As a skillful story writer, Gordimer creates the crisis in the story, just before the burial rites were about to commence. The old father finds the corpse too heavy and to the horror and utter dismay of the mourners, they discover that the person, whom they were carrying for burial, was not the brother of Petrus but some other person, who had mistakenly been handed over by the white health authorities. Even after paying twenty pounds for the corpse of their own brother, they were handed over the body of a complete stranger. For the black people, it was a bolt from



the blue. Despite all the maneuvers of the black servants and their white masters, Petrus' family could not get the body of their brother, and in a way they were denied of their customary rites to be followed for the dead. The dead black was also denied a proper burial at the hands of his own people. He was discriminated by the laws while he was yet alive and even death could not make him an equal of whites.

When Petrus lost all hopes of getting his brother's corpse, he hesitantly demanded the money back, but he neither got the body nor the money. Such incidents in their day to day life made blacks feel helpless as well as bitter.

### **Difficulty in Justifying Traditional Practices**

Through this story, Gordimer seems to suggest that even liberal whites find it hard to justify their deeds and actions. Petrus' master tried his level best to recover the actual body and later Petrus' money, but all his efforts were made in vain. He felt quite embarrassed. He guessed that Petrus would never believe that he has made the best of efforts, as black people strongly believe that, "white men have everything, can do anything; if they don't, it is because they won't."(*SFC* 13)

Thus through the story, Gordimer has also addressed one of her favourite themes, that white people find themselves in a very awkward situation, when they endeavour to help the black out. They lose more than they hope to gain in the process.

The masters of Petrus had made efforts to facilitate him, but they land themselves in a situation of self-accusation and a sense of guilt creeps in their heart. Eventually they try to

compensate the loss of Petrus' family by providing Petrus' father with an old suit for the winter. The irritation and agony which the white couple undergo, can best be described in the words of the narrator himself:

“I tried to get the money; Lerice tried. We both telephoned and wrote and argued, but nothing came of it. ...So the whole thing was a complete waste, even more of a waste for the poor devils than I had thought it would be.”(*SFC* 20)

### **To Conclude**

Thus the story reinforces Gordimer's belief that the laws of South Africa had strongly affected the lives of all people in South Africa, be they whites or blacks. But the blacks were all in loss Even their death could not release them from the inhuman laws. They stood discriminated even after their death.

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