

Protest Writing in South Africa

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Abstract

The proposed study shall primarily attempt to explore the Literature of Protest in South Africa and how it subverts the notion of white supremacy as an unquestionable fact of life. To explore how Nadine Gordimer's novels *My Son's Story*, *The Conservationist*, *July's People*, and *The Pickup* challenge representations of black South African people by the white supremacists. To bring out clearly how the anti-apartheid discourse stimulates writers to formulate a canon that will somehow be more open, more realistic than what is found in racial discourse. To observe how the select novels of Nadine Gordimer explore the possibilities of social, political and cultural transformation in South Africa. Attempt will be made to analyze critically the psychological dilemma/predicament faced by the black colonized and marginalized South African black people as depicted in the anti- apartheid South African literature in general and the novels of Nadine Gordimer in particular.

Key issues: Black African, Nadine Gordimer, Protest writing, postcolonial fiction, South Africa, and White Supremacy.

Introduction

Postcolonial fiction makes available an alternative discourse for the recovery of a literature lost or 'subaltern' told from the point of view of those who are subjugated and unheard rather than those who are at the centre of any society(the ruling class). With post-colonialism and deconstructionism radically raising issues and revising the concept of the original and simultaneously rejecting the authority of the authorship, protest writing has destabilized the web of power relations aimed at convincing the colonized subject that the colonizer's culture is at the centre.

Main Arguments

In tune with this, the South African anti-apartheid literature has emerged as a new genre of writing. The famous quote “What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central” by Babcock serves as the underlying basis for the new writing. This alternate discourse assumes importance for it provides culture specific perspectives and insights into the disparaged and demeaned denizens of colonized South Africa. It brings to front and explores the tensions, contradictions, identity crisis, mental dilemma and a psychological chaos that surrounds the issue of colored identity. The protest writing attempt to convincing the colonized populace that their stratification into colored or black is an administration invention, an attempt by the white supremacist state to preserve white racial purity by treating non-whites/black as a separate, coherent and homogenous race. Marginalized and victimized as they are, these authors use their writings to explore a legacy of oppression and injustice and to reclaim their lost inheritance.

Works iconic to anti-apartheid South African literature like J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace* and *The Life and Times of Michael K* set in an imagined future provide a critical insight into the actual situation of a life in a country, under an oppressive regime, an insightful and scathingly sensitive interrogation of the South African political and social conditions. Andre Brink’s *A Dry White Season* (1982) focuses on the death in detention of a black activist and hence causes great irritation to the apartheid state. Bessie Head gains prominence from the novels *When Rain Cloud Gather*, followed by *The Collection of Treasures* and *A Game of Power*. Bessie Head as she undertakes the double task of dismantling not only the racist discourse of the apartheid but also the racist or masculine elements of the available anti-apartheid discourses of her time in an attempt to adjust her dissident identity as an anti-apartheid author.

Similarly Nadine Gordimer, the Geiger counter of apartheid, appropriates factual and fictional materials, fearless characterization in the narrative which functions as the corroborative evidence, a counterweight to the colonizer’s regime propaganda. Her novels like *July’s People*, *The Conservationist*, *The Pickup* and *My Son’s Story* are instrumental to penetrate a society that protects itself against scrutiny, hides in censorship and where capitalism, liberalism and Marxism mean the same thing; an onslaught on the yolk. The Protest writing is characterized by the

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encouragement of the image of debasement, the colonial subject perceived as sophisticated white men caricatures. As such Nadine Gordimer is writing the “History from the inside” to make palpable the pernicious, all-pervasive outcome of South African race laws. The precise detail to evoke both the physical landscape of South Africa and the human predicament of a society racially polarized so as to voice the intransigent anti-apartheid opposition forges her considerable oeuvre out of circumstances that combine embattlement and privilege. The scrutiny of the movement from the repression enforced order of apartheid through the chaotic interregnum as evident in Nadine Gordimer’s above mentioned novels reveals prejudices and ideologies, the tension and mental anguish and pain of life, the defeat of tolerance and humanism in a racially divided society. She sensitively portrays the strains of divisiveness and oppression by monitoring their effect on individual black in her fiction.

Nadine Gordimer being a post-colonial writer tries to foreground the moral and psychological tensions of life in a racially-divided country/society. As she highlights the devastating psychological effects of political persecution on the lives of ordinary South Africans, it is interesting to see how she combines psychology and politics to approach and address the problem of national liberation, social revolution and the problem of personal identity through a sustained focus on the violence of the colonial encounter. Her novels can be seen as a complex exploration of the themes of economic, political and cultural repercussion of colonialism on the subconscious psyche of the colonized. It is also worthwhile to see how she looks at the past from the vantage point of present and foregrounds the ‘presentness of the past’.

Anti-apartheid Literature is an integral and important part of postcolonial literature and Nadine Gordimer has emerged to be its most resourceful writer. Most of the critical attention given to Gordimer has been in the nature of articles, reviews and essays published in different literary journals and critical anthologies. Critics have given more attention to her innovative technical features, thematic concerns, presentation of social deformity, racial injustice but not the psychological aspect which is the main concern of her study. Some seminal works on Nadine Gordimer are as under:

One of the most important works on Gordimer is a book entitled *Nadine Gordimer* by Michael Wade. It is a collection of six essays devoted entirely to Gordimer's work. It presents new perspectives on her fiction and provides a deeper understanding of her work, her famous anti apartheid novels like *The Conservationist*, *The Late Bourgeois World* and *The Lying Days*. Rob Nixon's article "NADINE GORDIMER from Scribner Writers Series. Published in: British Writers: Supplement 2. Ed. George Stade. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons", 1992 is another useful work on Nadine Gordimer. In this article, Nixon discusses Gordimer's novels within the context of anti apartheid movement and at the same time the article provides deeper insights to any broader study of the oppressive South African apartheid era and the consequent anti-apartheid movement. Another book entitled *The Ballistic Bard: Postcolonial Fiction* by Judie Newman has a very interesting essay on Nadine Gordimer entitled "Nadine Gordimer and the naked southern ape" where Newman speaks about the intersexuality in general and Gordimer's novella *Something Out There*.

Stephen Clingman's book *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* unloads great mountains of South African historical facts and systematically traces out their incorporation into Gordimer's novels. Her own political evolution from liberal humanism, to despair, to intransigent antiapartheid opposition is sketched out fully, and in such detail that the march of South African events actually dwarfs her. That particular disproportion is, however, welcome, because it places the emphasis where it belongs: on that ugliest of all colonial settler states in Africa. Paul Ric's article "APARTHEID AND THE DECLINE OF THE CIVILIZATION IDEA: AN ESSAY ON NADINE GORDIMER'S *JULY'S PEOPLE*" analyses the text of *July's People* and accentuates the detrimental effect on the social fabric due to the racial ills prevalent in apartheid South Africa. Martin Trump's *The Short Fiction of Nadine Gordimer* discusses in detail Nadine Gordimer's writing and how it coincides with the period of the marginalization of the white English speaking South African community. This book provides an alternate picture of colonization by depicting the sad process of alienation and social severance as felt by the colonizers. Shannon Jackson's article "White Privilege and Pedagogy: Nadine Gordimer in Performance" includes a very interesting study of some select short stories to highlight the devastating effect of apartheid. This essay uses Gordimer's text and the process of adapting it into a performance as the basis for theorizing relationships amongst postcolonial

theory, critical pedagogy, and performance and theatre studies. It particularly joins cultural theorists who try not only to recognize the experience of marginality but also to investigate the experience of privilege with more acuity.

Conclusion

For the recovery of a lost or 'subaltern' literature Postcolonial fiction provides an alternative discourse told from the point of view of those who are subjugated and unheard rather than those who are at the centre- the ruling class. With post-colonialism and deconstructionism radically questioning and revising the notion of the original and simultaneously rejecting the authority of the authorship, protest writing has destabilized the network of power relations aimed at convincing the colonized subject that the colonizer's culture is at the centre.

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