

Nadine Gordimer:

Notes on the White Writer's Burden

Neloufer de Mel

'Gordimer writes with intense immediacy about the extremely complicated personal and social relationships in her environment... At the same time as she feels political involvement - and takes action on that basis - she does not permit this to encroach on her writing.'

This statement by the Swedish Academy in its citation of South African writer Nadine Gordimer for the 1991 Nobel prize for literature, zeroes in - albeit unselfconsciously - on the controversy that surrounds both the prize and Gordimer's particular position as a white South African writer today.

To begin with, the lucrative profits to prize-winning author and his/her publisher that the publicity surrounding the award brings, as well as the 'supreme' acknowledgement of a work

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or an oeuvre which is 'of great benefit to humanity' the prize denotes, makes it a battleground for arguments about the merits and demerits of the author in question by his/her supporters and detractors alike. It is the ultimate recognition most writers strive for. Gordimer herself commented on hearing of her award, 'I had been a possible candidate for so long that I had given up hope.'

But controversy marks this prize not only for its prestige and market potential but also for the political expediency many read into the Nobel panel's decisions despite, or because of, statements like the one quoted above in which it disassociates politics from art and valorizes the work in which politics has not (and the metaphor here is telling) encroached. Professor Stur Allen, one of the 18 members of the Academy elected for life reiterated this position by declaring, 'The Nobel peace prize is a political award... This is a literary award. That is (Gordimer's) own argument - she is very keen on that

point. Her works have a political basis, but her writing is different.'

The fact remains however, that acknowledging on the world stage a writer like Gordimer, an active member of the ANC, advocate of black majority rule and patron of the largely black African Writers Congress, who rigorously depicts in her work her own white, liberal socio-political milieu and in doing so, engages in varying degrees with the horrific structures of apartheid in South Africa, can be seen as a political message to the South African regime. The award has been used as such a vehicle before when the prize to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1974) conveyed criticism of the institutional oppression in the U.S.S.R. Thus news of Gordimer's Nobel prize was greeted either with enthusiasm for its encouraging message to the South African government - the 'London Times' correspondent stated that 'With the crumbling of apartheid this is a politically correct award' - or derision as Tilak Gunawardhana did when he



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Punchi Banda Manatunga, Dharmaratna Weeratunga and Chandrasiri Rajakaruna were residents of Welimada Dikkapitiya. They were held at the Ratmalana Thelavala prison camp as terrorist suspects and released on the advise of the Jayalath Committee when investigations revealed that they had not been involved in terrorist activities.

According to reports, on the night of the 8th, an armed party, including a sub-inspector, had entered the houses of the three youths, forced them into their vehicle, and taken them to a forest not far from the railway station on the Welimada Rahangala Ohiya road. They had then been shot and killed and

finally burnt in tyres. Because their bodies had not been completely burnt, they were burnt again on the nights of the 9th and 10th so that they would not be recognised.

According to the father of Punchi Banda Manatunga, his son was taken away by the sub-inspector of police who had brought him from the Ratmalana Thelavala prison camp. Manatunga's father has further declared that he had paid Rs. 1000 to this police officer as travelling expenses for bringing his son from Ratmalana to Welimada. This is also mentioned in his statement to the police.

Badulla district SLFP MP Mr. Madduma Bandara had reported the homicides to the opposition leader Mrs.

Sirimavo Bandaranaike and through her made a written complaint to the Inspector General of Police.

Although the IGP had promised to send a special group of police officers from Colombo to meet the MP, up to the time of going to press, Mr. Madduma Bandara had received no visit from any such police group.

Meanwhile, the relatives of the dead persons had complained about the killings to the Uva Chief Minister Percy Samaraweera on the 9th. Although the Minister had made inquiries from the police stations in the area, these police stations have reported that no such 'arrests' were made.

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declared, 'It seems a belated recognition of something anti-racist, something that had to be recognized when the black Africans could get no hearing at all in world councils.'

That Gordimer's fiction lends itself to the manichean dichotomy between politics and art the Nobel panel so easily makes, points however to an ambivalent identity she herself inhabits, circumscribed by both the strengths and limitations of her white liberal position in South African politics today.

The daughter of Jewish migrants - her father from Lithuania and her mother from England - Gordimer was born in 1923 and grew up in Springs, a small mining town near Johannesburg. Involvement in politics came late. Her childhood ambition of being a ballet dancer was dashed when she had to leave school at the age of eleven because of an accelerated heart rate. Gordimer turned to literature while convalescing, reading voraciously and writing, publishing her first short story at the age of fifteen.

Gordimer's awareness about the socio-political and living conditions of the black mine workers in Springs was first kindled on reading Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), an expose of the Chicago meat-packing industry. The novel which dealt with the appalling conditions under which large sections of immigrants and black people in Chicago laboured, and which provoked public outrage so much so that the U.S. government was forced to investigate the trade, no doubt struck more than a familiar note with Gordimer who saw similar structures of racism and oppression operating in extreme against black people in South Africa. Moreover, her identification with the novel took on perhaps a more personal hue as its hero, Jurgis Rudkus, also an immigrant from Eastern Europe, turns to socialism as the only system which would redress the dispossession of the under-classes in Chicago.

The impact of Sinclair's novel on Gordimer suggests that within her own family and social background, political awareness of the condition of black South Africans and activism on that front were muted. It is when charting the limitations of her own milieu, as

James Wood describes, 'playing devil's advocate to her own liberal principles' that Gordimer's writing is at its strongest. Thus in *July's People* - the novel singled out in the Nobel citation as an outstanding work - Maureen and Bamber Smales have been benevolent employers. July has been their 'decently-paid and contented male servant, living in their yard since they had married, clothed by them in two sets of uniforms, khaki pants for rough housework, white drill for waiting at the table, given Wednesdays and alternate Sundays free, allowed to have his friends visit him and his town woman sleep with him in his room'. (p.9) It is perhaps in gratitude for such benevolence that July saves them from anti-white violence once the revolution occurs by taking them to, and harbouring them in his village. But as the book delineates in flashback the past lives of the Smaleses, what Gordimer insists we come to terms with are the patronizing, racist and classist attitudes that underpin their charity towards July, and that even as Maureen realizes that the reversal of roles means that July the saviour now calls for their gratitude, old white habits towards black employees and their kin die hard.

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Thus in a village which lacks electricity, in a situation in which they are grateful for the bare minimum for survival, Maureen's materialism which percolates to her children - 'Nothing made them so happy as buying things' (p.6) - and class consciousness has her warning her son Victor not to let the black children touch his electric train set lest they break it (p.14). Bam's spontaneous reaction to Maureen who is forced now by circumstance to drown kittens in a bucket of water, is to ask 'Why didn't you get one of them to do it?' (p.90) This assumes both a greater insensitivity on the part of July's people even as it provides a way of having the

job done, but not at Maureen's brutalized expense. Again, their emotional investment in the yellow bakkie as their only vehicle of escape from July's village - until the helicopter carrying 'saviours or murderers' that Maureen runs to at the end - makes them resent what they see as July's permission-unsought proprietorship over the car. As July learns to drive Bam comments, 'I would never have thought he would do something like that. He's always been so correct.' (p.58)

The expose of the Smaleses in *July's People* is masterful. Never irritatingly explicit, the reader is alerted to a highly nuanced gesture - Maureen's outstretched hand which, given the right moment she picks, can only mean a request for the return of the car keys (p.61) - or reaction - she has to coax a black child to come to her as she remains unfamiliar, an adult not to be trusted (p.68). The portraits are without caricature, only gentle irony, and what makes them wholly credible is the anguish the Smaleses inhabit, and which emanates not only from the disruption and insecurity of their present lives, but also their awareness of their irrationality and condescension.

It is however for the centrality the Smaleses occupy in the book and for the almost sympathetic portrait of this white family living in a Gramscian interregnum in which, as the quote at the beginning indicates, 'there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms' that Gordimer has been criticized by her black colleagues. For writer/critic Lewis Nkosi, that the revolution itself is marginalized and impinges on the narrative of *July's People* only through intermittent flashbacks and the static of a radio is symptomatic of the white South African writer's ambivalence to the crisis in his/her country. Nkosi declared, 'Too often the novel hints at or merely dwindles into the coziness (sic) of a small domestic drama. It simply cannot bring itself to imagine the murderous and tumultuous confusion that is likely to occur...no white liberal South African writer wants to imagine such a complete disruption of personal relationships.'

To insist that the oppression of black South Africans, or a new revolutionary order however nightmarish it is, constitutes the matrices of what is



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written on the country surely sounds too rigid and may even be dismissed as the voice of the propagandist. But Nkosi's criticism is important for the debate it provokes on the burden of the writer in crisis-ridden South Africa today. The spirit of his critique of Gordimer has to be placed in a context in which the inimical structure of apartheid, which we realize with shame is only an extreme version of the corrosive intolerance, prejudice and opportunism in our own societies, is so blatantly unjust, the regime that imposes it so powerful, that it calls for explicit and continuous moral outrage.

Inability, or decision not to express this amounts, particularly for writer/critics like Dennis Brutus who have suffered for their activism, a failure of moral nerve. For 'the writer of talent' is for Brutus, the one 'who dares not allow himself to develop because to do so, to look truthfully at South African society today, and then to describe truthfully his reactions to that society, can only land him in prison.' Gordimer, despite the banning of three of her novels and her outspokenness on censorship in South Africa, remains, for those like Brutus, privileged, for not having paid the price of imprisonment. And the burden of the writer to be passionate about the dismantling of apartheid, against which Gordimer's 'disinterested', controlled technique of understatement and subtle irony operates, elicits this comment by Brutus:

Though Nadine Gordimer would say that she is condemning South African society for being dehumanized, I would say that Nadine Gordimer who is one of our most sensitive writers, is also the standing, the living example of how dehumanized South African society has become—that an artist like this lacks warmth, lacks feeling, but can observe with the coldness of a machine...

Brutus's personal tirade against Gordimer is then, for an all too oblique attack on the system in her work. Her emphasis on the privileged white liberal whose political ambivalence she prods and exposes but gently, even seductively, falls short of what is needed as a political programme in South Africa. Gordimer's novel *The Conservationist* is a case in point. Set

in the mid 1970s, the time of the oil crisis, emphasis in South Africa as elsewhere was on conservation. The period provides a springboard for Gordimer to consider conservation in its many mutations and ironically focus on the reactionary fight of white farm owner Mehring to preserve his domain and power - also a form of conservation. But as Michael Toolan points out, the many seductive aspects to life in the veld, the breath-taking beauty of this South African landscape that Gordimer describes, can have the indulgent reader sympathize with a Mehring who becomes then, understandably fond of the natural world of his farm.

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The interregnum that Gordimer maps in her work is then problematic for its emphases. Gramsci's statement in his *Prison Notebooks* - 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms' - is, for Gordimer, the perfect description of her own times in South Africa. The 'morbid symptoms' are experienced by both blacks and whites at varying levels and in different manifestations. Blacks suffer institutional oppression and violence not just by whites but also from their own kind. But such suffering is marginalized for what the whites suffer. The interregnum is for them, primarily a time of uncertainty. As Gordimer wrote in her essay 'Living in the Interregnum', 'the white who has declared...for (the) future, who was never at home in white supremacy, does not know whether he will find his home at last.' In this insecure state, the Smaleses, Mehring and both Hillela Capran's aunts - Olga the socialite and Pauline the liberal activist - in *A Sport of Nature* are brought to crisis. Their assumptions shattered, judgements called into question and roles reversed, they watch their familiar world crumble either helplessly or defiantly, but even this resistance is shown to be displaced and futile.

At times however, a common meeting-ground between black and white can be found, but in a medium other than the linguistic. In the short story entitled 'The Bridegroom', the Afrikaner supervisor of a road gang prepares for marriage. He is a reticent figure and overtly racist. The black people - 'a raw bunch of kaffirs' who couldn't do anything right (p.118) - are an eye-sore. As they cannot be hidden away in the bush, he orders them to keep away from the compound when he returns with his wife - 'They must just understand that they mustn't hang around.' (p.118) On his last night as a bachelor however, as he sits outside in the dusk sipping his brandy after work, a 'huge man whose thick black body had strained apart every seam in his ragged pants and shirt' begins to play an instrument which resembles a lyre. The music he makes 'was caught by the very limits of the capacity of the human ear; it was almost out of range. The first music man ever heard, when they began to stand upright among the rushes at the river, might have been like it.' (p.121) It is a primordial music which makes 'what the young man was feeling inside him...find a voice; (and which went) up into the night beyond the fire, uncoiling from his breast and giving ease.' (pp.122-3) Gordimer shows however that neither the moment nor its effect last long. The young man wants to share his brandy with the musicians, but holds back with a 'Hell, no man, it was mad' (p.122), and as the music stops, reverts to his role as master, shouting orders to his factotum Piet. But there had been a powerful moment in which 'Nobody spoke, the barriers of tongues fell with silence' as the music transcended the values and thus the prejudices and hierarchies that language carry.

For those whites who live beyond the interregnum which Gordimer depicts in a novel like *A Guest of Honour* and the short story 'A Soldier's Embrace', it is a space signifying the loss of identity and inevitable disillusionment. 'A Soldier's Embrace' plots the declining status of a liberal white lawyer and his wife who resisted the surge of migration by fellow whites fleeing the country as the revolution occurred, to stay behind and be of use to the new system, which however, no longer needs them. Their contact in the government is Chipande, a bright boy from the slums whom the

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lawyer took on as an apprentice and then befriended. Chipande returns from exile to be the confidential secretary to the President, and as the white couple wait anxiously for contact with him, the painful realization that they no longer figure in his priority list, that even confidence in their competence and usefulness cannot be taken for granted, is made. The story ends with them joining the exodus of whites from this new South Africa to a difficult exile.

There is, in 'A Soldier's Embrace', an implied critique of a new group of black politicians like Chipande who are at best busy bureaucrats, at worst time-servers. But Gordimer more than insinuates the grip of the black regime which grows in intolerance and incompetence. Chipande is not free, or does not choose to discuss 'black men who presented themselves a threat to the Party' with the white lawyer (p.16); censorship operates as news, albeit sensationalist, of arrests and investigations of foreign businessmen trickle in from outside (p.18); shops empty, looting takes place.

This then is the arena in which whites have no place, or even if they do, as Evelyn Bray realizes on returning from exile as 'a guest of honour' to serve as a consultant to the new government, do not want it as hopes for the new order turn sour. The hoax of independence that has bedeviled many former colonies provides Gordimer with enough evidence of the problematic of post-coloniality today. The politics of economic aid, neo-colonial machinations, corruption, the tear at the seams which forcibly held together diverse ethnic groups and cultures under a common colonial yoke, and which now spawns civil wars, tribal unrest and fundamentalism that stalk these countries are there for all to see. But again, it is for the emphasis which only considers the impact of these on the whites, for the refusal to place them in the context of the historical ruptures that forced these colonies to leave their histories and enter others, that Gordimer has been faulted.

Gordimer is acutely aware of the bind she is in as a South African writer today. She stated, 'Any writer's attempt to present in South Africa a totality of human experience within his own

country is subverted before he sets down a word. As a white man, his fortune may change; the one thing he cannot experience is blackness - with all that implies in South Africa.' Gordimer's insight into the nature of representation - the totality of human experience - the writer is required to make is important, for it locates the predicament of the writer who narrativizes his/her own contemporary history. The problem is then that the distorted and repressive South Africa of today (the dismantling of apartheid and the establishment of a serious democracy have a long way to go yet), imposes an obligation on the writer to continuously argue for change not only at political forums but also in the creative text. In such a context, his/her characters are seen as representatives of milieu, gender and race, while cracks in the text are analyzed for the writer's political awareness and commitment.

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Thus Gordimer's emphasis on the white liberal is considered a failure of perspective because, although she problematizes the space that white South African liberals occupy extremely skilfully, she does so at the expense of the black experience which is relegated to the margins. Moreover, when her black characters and situations are read as prototypes, Gordimer's selectiveness - their lack of roundedness when compared to the highly nuanced milieu of the privileged white she describes - is glaring. In *July's People*, July himself is portrayed adroitly. A Toussaint L'Ouverture figure who persists in looking after his white family through the revolution, who needs someone else to order him to burn his passbook which is the degrading symbol of his race (p.137), but who grows, although imperceptibly, in stature, is credible. But July's village, mostly described in terms of its squalor, is one in which no adult, except for July, is kind and therefore humane in his/her response

to the plight of the Smaleses. Its black children bathe in a river carrying 'water-borne diseases whose names no one here knew.'(p.138) On the one hand, that the diseases were unknown because the children were totally immune to them sounds far-fetched. On the other, what Gordimer does is deprive the village of language, for surely they would have their own names for conditions such as Bilharzia which Maureen is aware of and tries to protect her children from.

July's village becomes akin then to Crusoe's island which Defoe similarly made into an empty space, one which was uninhabited (incredible for a land so fertile), so that Crusoe could reign supreme, and without acrimony, as he did not have to wrest away the island from natives as Prospero did in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The analogy between the South African village and Crusoe's Caribbean habitat becomes further stressed in Gordimer's novel when Bam, the Crusoe-like practical artisan, builds a make-shift water tank for the villagers who had not thought of this technology before, and becomes the provider of meat as he kills wild boar with a shotgun, his skill in this stressed as a rifle would have been more appropriate for the task (p.77). What we have here then is, perhaps, an unconscious (but symptomatic?) emptying of the African village of its store of knowledge and modes of survival so that Bam, who has lost his status and urban white world remains yet privileged and supreme in this setting. Read in this way, *July's People* becomes a significant case study of Gordimer's own ambivalence to the black experience despite her overt avowal of the black person's right to self-determination.

Nadine Gordimer's narrativizations speak poignantly then of the creative writer's burden, even dilemma, of having to write one's self into one's own time without being propagandist or escapist. It is a task further burdened by having to live/write in a country like South Africa which does not allow one the freedom of not engaging rigorously in its politics and getting away with it.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Craig R. Whitney, 'Nadine Gordimer: The Nobel Prize Winner,' New York Times, reprinted in *The Island*, 15.10.1991.



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2. Quoted in Craig R. Whitney, 'Nadine Gordimer: The Nobel Prize Winner,' *New York Times*, reprinted in *The Island*, 15.10.1991. Of course, the western bias to such awards and their blatant political expediency have been well noted before. *The London Times*, 4.10.1991. p.12 Of course, the western bias to such awards and their blatant political expediency have been well noted before.
3. *The London Times*, 4.10.1991. p.12
4. Tilak Gunawardhana, 'Nobel Laureates in Literature - Significant Biases,' *Ceylon Daily News*, 23.10.1991. p.15.
5. Gordimer's first collection of short stories entitled *Face to Face* was published in 1949. Since then she has published 10 novels and over 200 short stories, her most recent collection of stories being *Jump* which she was promoting in the U.S. when she received news of her award.
6. *The London Times*, p.12.
7. James Wood, 'Lyrical Analyst of a Nation,' *The Guardian* (London), 10.10.1991. p.27.
8. Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981). Pagination will be from this edition.
9. Lewis Nkosi, 'Two Reviews,' *Home and Exile* (London: Longman, 1983), p.158.
10. Brutus was particularly active in canvassing for the world-wide boycott of South African sport and served on Robben Island.
11. Dennis Brutus, 'Protest Against Apartheid,' *Protest and Conflict in African Literature* ed. Cosmo Pieterse and Donald Munro (London: Heinemann, 1969) p.100. My italics.
12. *Ibid.*, p.97.
13. Michael Toolan, 'Taking Hold of Reality: Politics and Style in Nadine Gordimer,' *ACLALS Bulletin* 7 no.1, 1985. p.87.
14. Nadine Gordimer, 'Life in the Interregnum,' *New York Review of Books*, 20.1.1983. p.22.
15. Nadine Gordimer, 'The Bridegroom,' *African Short Stories* ed. Chinua Achebe and C.L. Innes (London: Heinemann, 1985). Pagination will be from this edition.
16. Nadine Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980). Pagination will be from this edition.
17. Gordimer considered emigrating to Zambia once, but was very aware of 'the truth, which was that in Zambia I was regarded by black friends as a (sic) European, a stranger.' Quoted in Craig Whitney, p.14.
18. Gordimer, quoted in Michael Toolan, p.78.
19. Toussaint L'Ouverture, eventual leader of the Haitian revolution of 1792-1803 which was the first war of independence fought by a colony against the colonizer (in this case France), joined the revolution late as he stayed back to protect his white employers from anti-white violence in the first phase of the struggle. For a compelling account of the Haitian revolution and Toussaint's role in it, see C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (London: Allison and Busby, 1983). This book was first published in 1938.

On Campus

UNIVERSITIES : A GATHERING STORM?

Tension is building up again in the universities. This time, the issue is the Affiliated Regional University Colleges being set up by the University Grants Commission. Student opposition has so far been expressed by posters and leaflets and at meetings and seminars. The higher education authorities appear to take little notice of the protests. However, anybody who is sensitive to the goings on in the universities will notice the clear signs of student discontent turning into confrontation.

The 'regional university college' is an innovative idea aimed at reforming the higher education system in Sri Lanka. It was conceived and recommended by the Presidential Commission on Youth Unrest. The government readily accepted the proposal and advised the UGC to set up 9 regional colleges before the end of this year. According to reports, plans have been finalized to take in the first batch of students.

On paper at least, the new scheme seeks to ease the terrible bottle-neck crisis of Sri Lanka's higher education by expanding vocation-oriented tertiary education. The Colleges are not micro-replicas of existing universities. They are expected to give academic training a vocational orientation linked to the economies of the respective provinces.

In its Report, the Youth Commission recommended a scheme which should "constitute a major re-adjustment of our tertiary education system." It also recognised "the fundamental

challenge" facing tertiary education as the maintenance of high academic standards with limited resources.

Why is it that perhaps the vast majority of university students and a considerable number of faculty members appear to object to this scheme?

According to Dr. S. Hettige, the Senior Student Counsellor of the University of Colombo, "Many students feel that this will bring about a devaluation of university education. In the national universities, there are serious problems with regard to trained teachers, with many departments being understaffed. The students, therefore, expect the universities to be affected. They would rather see the existing universities being improved and expanded."

The Student Counsellor, however, did not want to speculate on the likely percentage of students and academics who decidedly opposed the new scheme: "The views are divided, of course, among the critical, the supportive, the indifferent and the non-committal."

Certainly, some sections of the student community have been unequivocal. The General Student Assembly in a statement issued on 23 October states: "This is a fraudulent scheme meant to dupe the youth of this country. If there is a sincere need to provide a university education to every student who qualified for it, the government should stop its wasteful celebrations and divert the money saved to improve university education." The statement also underlines a concern about the newly established 'elitist' private institutions which provide, to a select few, a 'professional' education far more marketable than university education.

This controversy raises a fundamental issue with regard to public policy. Shouldn't the government submit its policy proposals, however well intended they may be, to informed and serious public debate and discussion? On the issue of regional colleges, it appears that the government thinks otherwise.

