

THE BURDEN OF LEGACY IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *BURGER'S DAUGHTER*

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ABSTRACT:

IN SOUTH AFRICA, THE RISE OF APARTHEID AS A LEGITIMATE RULING SYSTEM IN THE 1950S AND THE 1960S BROUGHT ABOUT A REVIVAL OF THE ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENT THAT WOULD DIVIDE THE SOCIETY EVEN FURTHER. THUS, GORDIMER'S NOVELS WRITTEN AFTER THE SHARPEVILLE MASSACRE WILL FOCUS ON THE SHIFT FROM A PEACEFUL STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID TOWARDS A RADICAL SOLUTION – REVOLUTION - THAT WOULD PUT AN END TO THE SOCIAL, ECONOMICAL AND POLITICAL INJUSTICES PERPETRATED BY THE WHITES IN SOUTH AFRICA. THIS PAPER SETS OUT TO EXAMINE THE IMPACT THAT HERITAGE AND LEGACY HAVE OVER PERSONAL IDENTITY IN GORDIMER'S BURGER'S DAUGHTER.

KEYWORDS: IDENTITY, LEGACY, REVOLUTION, APARTHEID, SOUTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

After the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, the Nationalist government banned both the ANC and the PAC under the Unlawful Organizations Act. The leaders were arrested, put to trial and, most of them (Mandela included), exiled to Robben Island where they were imprisoned. For the ANC and PAC, the failure of the anti-pass law campaign, the Sharpeville slaughter, the subsequent arrests and imprisonments, and the banning of their organizations were sobering experiences. Forced underground, the organizations resorted to the last option that was available: a move from the Gandhian commitment to avoid harming human life towards a guerilla-like struggle. Nelson Mandela told the court how difficult it was for the ANC leadership to abandon nonviolence. The ANC "had always stood for nonracial democracy, and we shrank from any policy which might drive the races further apart than they already were"². Yet they could not "continue preaching nonviolence at a time when the Government met our peaceful demands with force"³. As a result, as Gordimer observed, "violence has become the South African way of life"⁴.

The most important change that occurs in Gordimer's writing in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre is that the characters are now constructed as "abstractions"⁵ living their

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² Nelson Mandela, quoted in Roger B. Beck, *The History of South Africa* (London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 143.

³ Nelson Mandela, quoted in Roger B. Beck, *The History of South Africa*, 144.

⁴ Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History: Notes on our Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 140.

⁵ Syeda Faiqa Mazhar, *A Study of the Theme of Borderland in Nadine Gordimer's Fiction* (PhD diss., University of Bedfordshire, 2007), 109.

lives against the background of a larger and more committed political framework. Their pervasive interest is in changing the South African reality by any means necessary and that can only be achieved by moving beyond the racial divide. For Bhabha, the ‘beyond’ offers a “terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself”⁶. This is exactly what Gordimer does in *Burger’s Daughter* - she attempts to assess whether there can be a role for whites in the context of Sharpeville, Soweto and after, and what the implications of such a role might be.

ARGUMENTATION

Burger’s Daughter is set in South Africa between 1948 – the year when the first Nationalist government took office - and 1976 – the year in which the Soweto students’ boycott took place. This historical backdrop is juxtaposed with Rosa Burger’s own, personal history – a burdensome background, as she is the daughter of a famous leader of the South African Communist Party, Lionel Burger. Rosa tells the past experiences of her childhood as she embarks on a journey of self-definition, at first trying to distance herself from the family’s legacy, but ultimately coming back to it and, inescapably, going to jail. The personal memoirs, as well as the multitude of analepses and prolepses, span the historical and political changes of those years, and by doing so the novel manages to show how public realities are interiorized by people from various backgrounds, how the destiny of a nation is crucial for private lives. It is not by chance, then, that Visel called the novel a “fictionalized history” of anti-apartheid activism in South Africa⁷.

Almost the entire action of the novel has to do with Rosa’s revolt against both her historical heritage and the problems of her current situation. As a matter of fact, the theme of the novel is, in Gordimer’s own words: “human conflict between the desire to live a personal, private life, and the rival claim of social responsibility to one’s fellow men – human advancement”⁸ and is explored through the personage of Rosa Burger. This conflict, Gordimer continues, “is central to civilized man’s existence” and contains both the essential challenge of Christ’s teaching and Freud’s view of the problems of human existence⁹.

After Lionel Burger and his wife, Cathy Burger’s death, Rosa wishes to stay away from what she has been doing so far, namely to deny her own individuality in favour of political needs, and so she opts for what she has never had: the experience of a private life. Right from the start we realize that Rosa’s life is characterized by predetermination; the fact that she is the daughter of Lionel Burger seems to determine her existence before she can even choose what she wants to do. There is no escape for her and even the most intimate details of her existence bear the mark of her father’s identity.

Growing up in her father’s shadow, Rosa never had the chance to do anything for herself. Looking back at her only “love” experience she has had so far, she remembers how she subjected herself to her father’s wishes by accepting a false betrothal to a political prisoner in order to carry messages more easily back and forward from prison. However, Rosa is not ashamed or scandalized by such a past experience as she says: “we didn’t despise prostitutes in that house – our house – we saw them as victims of necessity while certain social orders lasted”¹⁰. Nevertheless, with her parents’ death, the time has come now for her to explore a

⁶ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-2.

⁷ Robin Ellen Visel, *White Eve in the ‘Petrified Garden’*. *The Colonial African Heroine in the writing of Olive Schreiner, Isak Dinesen, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1987), 6.

⁸ Nadine Gordimer, “What the Book Is About”, ed. Judie Newman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 149.

⁹ Nadine Gordimer, “What the Book Is About”, 149.

¹⁰ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger’s Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 65.

private existence; the protagonist rebels against the idea that to be Lionel Burger's daughter is to be condemned to this fate. Although all of her father's friends and collaborators expect her to take the relay further, she dismisses her mission, rejecting her destiny. What determines her to go on a journey to Europe is the need to leave the site of all these problems and to search for her own identity. With the dismissal of her legacy, she is no longer 'Burger's daughter'; from now on she is just Rosa.

In Rosa's desire "to know somewhere else"¹¹, namely to leave South Africa behind and start a new life elsewhere, Gordimer shows the ravaging capacity of apartheid to break down people psychologically. By leaving her country behind, Rosa admits to her inability to further withstand the injustices her people live through on a daily basis. The scene in which she returns to Johannesburg from Soweto and comes across a beaten donkey on the road sums up her suffering:

I didn't see the whip. I saw agony. Agony that came from terrible centre seized within the group of donkey, cart driver and people behind him (...) Not seeing the whip, I saw the infliction of pain broken away from the will that creates it; broken loose, a force existing of itself, ravishment without the ravisher, torture without the torturer, rampage, pure cruelty gone beyond control of the humans who have spent thousands of years devising it¹².

Feeling powerless, Rosa doesn't take any action in stopping the black man from beating the donkey, though she "could have stood between them and the suffering – the suffering of the donkey"¹³. It would seem that the only way in which Rosa could intervene to stop the cruelty perpetrated against the animal would be to make use of her position of white authority; however, in doing that she would be catalogued as yet another white who clearly cares for animals more than she does for people. Shaken by the implications of her situation, Rosa does not know what role to assume; it is now, in the face of her own impotence, that she realizes she no longer knows "how to live in Lionel's country"¹⁴. This is another way of expressing her intention to 'defect' from politics in search of other ways of understanding and living her life. This scene represents the last drop in her decision to head for Europe and in her justification to do that.

In *Burger's Daughter*, as it is also the case of several other novels, the dismissal a character opts for in terms of his/her inheritance is only a part of the larger story. In Europe Rosa is on the verge of finding the personal fulfillment she has been dreaming of since her parents died: she moves in with Katya, her father's first wife, makes a lot of friends and she falls in love with a married French teacher, Bernard Chaballier; moreover, she is planning to obtain a residency permit so as to be able to settle in France. By making the choice of having a love affair with a married man, Rosa renounces her background and takes on the role of a mistress. Thus, her identity shifts from that of the daughter of a defiant communist to that of a French mistress.

This does not affect her because in Europe she is not judged by others from the standpoint of who her father was and this allows her to become invisible and blend in. This enables Rosa to live the way she wants; for the first time in her life she feels she has the right to choose how to spend her time without the burden of her father hanging over her. But, right at this point in her life (for important historical reasons), she comes to the understanding that,

¹¹ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 185.

¹² Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 210-211.

¹³ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 212.

¹⁴ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 213.

after all, it is of utmost importance for her to go back to South Africa and take up the responsibilities of the social contract she has inherited. Instead of lifting off her shoulders the sense of commitment, Rosa's journey to Europe sends her back to the same world of responsibilities because she realizes that "I am the place in which something has occurred"¹⁵.

Thus, the novel takes "a dialectical form"¹⁶. In the first part of the novel we have Rosa, together with her revolutionary legacy; but, in the second part she rejects this inheritance and opts for personal life; however, in the third section of the book she re-unites with that inheritance, while at the same time finding "her personal identity in becoming socially and historically committed"¹⁷. In order to bring Rosa out of her marginality in her South African world, Gordimer takes her to Europe, and then brings her back to her old life but with "broadened sympathy and understanding this time"¹⁸. Rosa now comes to the realization that the only way to achieve personal freedom in South Africa is to fight against the apartheid system; in her decision to do so, she becomes again 'Burger's daughter', accepting her family identity and her undeniable connection with her father's tradition.

But what really happened in Europe that made Rosa change her mind and heart entirely? The answer to this question needs to be looked for in the historical and political context of South Africa. On the 16th of June 1976 about 15,000 schoolchildren gathered at Orlando West Junior Secondary School in Soweto to protest against the enforced use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools. The meeting started with peaceful intentions, but by the time it ended two children had been shot by the police. They were only the first of many to come, for what followed was one of the most politically intense periods of modern South African history, as an unexpected phase of resistance burst with extraordinary intensity. It is impossible to give a full account of what came to be known as the Soweto Revolt all the more that this is not our intention here, but its key features need to be brought up to the fore, so that we can better understand Rosa's decision to come back to South Africa better.

First of all, the riot was a cultural episode of resistance inasmuch as it was a political one; the issue was not just related to the use of Afrikaans (regarded by many as the language of oppression) in schools, but it also took on aspects related to the somewhat-newly initiated Black Consciousness Movement. This movement started with Steve Biko, a student at Natal University's "non-White" medical school, who led a separation of Black students from the White-dominated National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) in 1968 and helped form the South African Students' Organization¹⁹. Biko rejected liberalism and proposed a new doctrine which argued that black liberation could only be accomplished by the black people themselves. The first step towards this accomplishment had to be represented by a break free from the shackles of psychological inferiority. From Biko's standpoint apartheid was "an eyesore spoiling an otherwise beautiful view"²⁰. He didn't believe in the white liberal's true commitment to the black cause and asked how far they were prepared to go. The Black Consciousness movement was open to Blacks (defined as all those who faced White racial discrimination) and included Coloureds, Indians, and Africans.

Therefore, the Soweto Revolt draws much of its essence from the Black Consciousness Movement which pleaded for cultural revival and the assertion of black dignity and identity. The fact that the BCM's philosophy was very popular in schools makes it no surprise that the

¹⁵ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 1.

¹⁶ Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 179; Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 113.

¹⁷ Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, 179.

¹⁸ Syeda Faiqa Mazhar, *A Study of the Theme of Borderland in Nadine Gordimer's Fiction* (PhD diss., University of Bedfordshire, 2007), 141.

¹⁹ Roger B. Beck, *The History of South Africa* (London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 159.

²⁰ Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London: the Bowerdean Press, 1978), 22.

Soweto uprising was also, to a large extent, “a revolt of children”²¹. This was primarily a revolt that started in schools, spread through them and sometimes reached universities, but in which, for the very first time, it was the youth who led, and their elders who followed.

The idea that a children’s revolt could be easily put down and contained was far from what happened in reality; the children seemed fearless in their confrontations with the police as they marched into the latter’s bullets. The path of the revolt also spread like wildfire throughout the country and there was scarcely any part of it that wasn’t touched by the revolt. The impact of the Soweto riot can be best measured in the fact that it took the full force of the police, with all the resources and laws at their disposal and more than one year to put an end to it. Nevertheless, by the time it ended, the Soweto Riot had become a historical landmark; totaling a number of more than 2,389 wounded and 575 dead, the revolt had earned a central place in the calendar of resistance in South Africa and set the tone for the decade to come²².

This is the context that *Burger’s Daughter* grew from: the realities to which it responded. Gordimer was very much affected by these events that shook the second half of the 1970s. As a result, Stephen Clingman argues, “*Burger’s Daughter* is an attempt to deal with the practical and moral implications of this massive psycho-historical problem”²³; it is the writer’s response to the Black Consciousness Movement and an investigation into a “role for whites in the context of Soweto and after”²⁴. Clearly, Biko’s movement is central to this. There are traces of it everywhere in the novel; it first appears at a party that Rosa attends where some young blacks dismiss an analysis of South African life that a white communist makes for them: “*This* and *this* should happen and can’t happen because of *that* and *that*. These theories don’t fit us. We are not interested. You’ve been talking this shit before I was born”²⁵.

However, Rosa is the one who confronts it in the most direct way and its after effects make her go back to the country of her birth and join the resistance movement. At one of the political meetings she attends while in Europe, Rosa encounters a black man named Bassie (which translates as Little Boss). While he was a young boy, Bassie had lived with the Burgers, enjoying all the advantages that white people had. It had been more than ten years since Rosa saw Bassie, so she is very happy to meet her ‘half-brother’ with whom she shared her childhood years. Nevertheless, after the party ends and they part, Rosa is woken up in the middle of the night by a phone call from him that would change everything. He tells Rosa that Bassie is not his real name and the one she never knew is Zwelinzima Vulindlela (meaning ‘suffering land’). It is interesting to note that Rosa cannot pronounce his name correctly, a fact which suggests her estrangement from her past; she has forgotten her suffering land along with her brother.

Zwelinzima is not calling to share memories from their childhood; on the contrary, he is calling to settle things that have been on his heart for a long time. He bitterly rejects the fake brotherhood he has had with Rosa and Lionel’s paternalism that only managed to distance him (by living a privileged life) from the rest of his people. Most importantly, he rejects Lionel’s heritage by arguing that there are hundreds of black men, his father included (who died from an improbable suicide), who have also died in jail, often more violently than Lionel:

Everyone in the world must be told what a great hero he was and
how much he suffered for the blacks. Everyone must cry over him

²¹ Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 180.

²² Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 179.

²³ Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, 183.

²⁴ Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, 170.

²⁵ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger’s Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 161.

and show his life on television and write in the papers. Listen, there are dozens of our fathers sick and dying like dogs, kicked out of the locations when they can't work anymore. Getting old and dying in prison. Killed in prison.²⁶

The black names have been forgotten, their heroism has remained untold, while white men, such as Rosa's father, get all the glory: "Whatever you whites touch, it's a takeover"²⁷. Consumed with hatred, Baasie "expresses not only his personal feelings based on past incidents, the pain of which he constantly relives, but also a collective demand"²⁸. As Zwelinzima urges Rosa to turn on the lights (a metaphor for seeing the truth), she confronts the full extent of what is happening and is literally sickened; finally, in shame and anger, she vomits up the remains of what she has eaten at the party²⁹. Zwelinzima's speech marks a new revolution in Rosa's identity and it is the catalyst for her decision to go back to South Africa and renew the social commitment her father left off.

Moreover, the symbolic power of the scene is of great significance in the larger context of South Africa. Zwelinzima is the direct representative of the Black Consciousness ethos and his accusations are clearly hitting home. Lionel's (or any white's, for that matter) actions, although taken with the best of intentions and out of genuine care, are rejected and seen as hypocritical. If some whites have dedicated their lives to the struggle for the blacks' liberation, they should not expect any gratitude or sympathy. By leaving her father's legacy behind, Rosa has opened a great rift in the self – other dichotomy, by placing the 'self' in a priority position. Now she has to readjust and close that rift so that the dichotomy can regain its balance once again. She can no longer stay passive and watch as millions of fellow-citizens are bleeding; she has to act in the spirit that her mother and father had taught her to.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the novel the reader, together with the protagonist, realize that all this time Rosa had been running from her father's memory in search of her own identity; yet her identity was closely tied to that of her country and the anti-apartheid struggle. During his trial, Lionel Burger said: "I would be guilty only if I were innocent of trying to destroy racism in my country"³⁰. Rosa feels that guilt and realizes that all this time she took up an identity which she did not want. Her reflection on the reasons for which she should go back echoes the meaning of Zwelinzima's South African name:

No one can defect. / I don't know the ideology:
It's about suffering. / How to end suffering.
And it ends in suffering.³¹

Ultimately, for Rosa Burger, daughter of legendary radicals Lionel and Cathy Burger, the question of alignment turned out, as Dominic Head argues, not to be a matter of choice: there was no escaping her inheritance in the first place; all that there had been was a need for the protagonist to refine and define what it meant for her personally³². Throughout the novel,

²⁶ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 328.

²⁷ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter*, 329.

²⁸ Denise Brahim, trans., *Nadine Gordimer: Weaving together Fiction, Women and Politics* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2012), 108.

²⁹ Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 184

³⁰ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 22.

³¹ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter*, 343-344.

³² Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 111.

there is a recurrent phrase that describes Rosa's wish, her desire to "live like anyone else". At the close of the novel, when we can hear Rosa's own voice, she repeats the phrase no less than five times in half a page and ends with the comment "Like anyone else, I do what I can"³³. No longer a hero but merely a political prisoner among others, Rosa has become "ordinary, richly and passionately ordinary."³⁴

³³ Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 345.

³⁴ Judie Newman, *Introduction to Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter: a Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23.

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