



## FEMINIST CONCERNS IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *MY SON'S STORY*

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### Abstract

Nadine Gordimer, the first Nobel Prize winner of South Africa reflects in her fiction the heart rending racial and political problems in her country ruled by apartheid. Her tenth novel, *My Son's Story*, shows a subtle shift in her literary pursuit by highlighting gender issues in the building of a new nation. Gordimer believes that racial issues should be solved first, later feminist battle be fought. Critics assert that strong and consistent feminist concerns are embedded in Gordimer's works. Especially these have received central focus in *My Son's Story*, making the novel Gordimer's unequivocally feminist novel. But Gordimer has never accepted her novel as feministic but

<p>CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0</p>	<p>the reader can understand the positive evolution of female characters against the background of revolution. It is a tale of a Coloured school master, Sonny who turns out a good speaker and is recruited into the banned African National Congress (ANC) and gets higher positions in it which causes loss of his government job and detention in jail for two years. In prison, he is attracted by Hannah, a blonde activist for an International Human Rights Agency who occasionally visits the detainees. His love affair with her alienates him from his wife Aila, daughter Baby and son Will. Gradually his condition both personally and politically degenerates while Aila and Baby move from passive domestic roles to active political ones when Aila skips bail, Hannah takes a new assignment. Both leave Sonny to take up further political work. Thus, the paper presents gradual degradation of Sonny's character and emergence of supremacy of the female characters like Aila, Baby and Hannah in critical, political and historical times through which the novelist's feminist concerns are reflected.</p> <p><b>Key Words:</b> Feministic, Evolution, activist, alienation, personal and political degeneration, supremacy.</p>
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Nadine Gordimer, the first Nobel Prize winner for Literature in South Africa of 1991 reinforced her position in the international literary world as South Africa's leading voice through depiction of the realities of life under apartheid. All her novels and short stories make apartheid their background until its demise in 1994. In this apartheid period, South African society is severely divided to maintain and promote white economic and social privileges. In this society class and race conditions are designed by law and coercive power of the government. As Stephen Clingman has remarked about South African Apartheid society,

To be born black is not only to be deprived of the vote, but virtually to be committed to the role of the worker, whether in industry, mining or agriculture, at generally extortionate rates of pay. To be born white, on the contrary, is to enjoy a position of privilege, most obviously in terms of the vote but also socially and economically, even at the lower echelons of white society. (*TNNG* 15)

With her long years of observation, Gordimer has understood and absorbed the heart-rending plight of the blacks and gives us a unique sense of her nation's unfolding history. Since 1986 extraordinary changes had been established in the South African historical setting. Indomitable resistance to apartheid has reached precarious stage. Not providing enough houses to the blacks

and offering well-developed houses and apartments for the whites and prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act in 1949 and the 1950 Immortality Act, which made cross-color sexual unions illegal (Ashcroft et al, 2007, p.14) depicted the beginning of institutionalized racism in South Africa. Gordimer's *My Son's Story* depicts the anticipation of these changes and responses to them. The changing patterns of these transformations can be lucidly seen in her fiction. Particularly, *My Son's Story* records a substantive shift in the focus of Gordimer. The novel reconfigures gender roles in constructing apartheid free country. It is an epitome of changing focus from Gordimer's idea that only after the racial struggle is won, the feminist battle may be fought.

Mamphela Ramphele, the principal of the University of Cape Town opines that "Key oppressions of sex, race and class are interrelated and struggles against them must be coordinated". Famous critics Dorothy Driver and Karen Lazar feel that the Gordimer's *My Son's Story* is embedded with strong feminist concerns. Barbara Temple Thurston quotes that, "*In My Son's Story* these concerns are central, making it Gordimer's first unequivocally feminist novel" (NGR 114). As per their conceptions all the women characters in the novel are empowered and raised from personal to political level with great political activism to emancipate their country.

Feminism is defined as an ideology which tries to establish and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women. A feminist is a champion of equal right to women such as the right to vote, to get jobs, to get equal pay at work, to own assets, to get education, to have equal rights in marriage. Feminists have also worked to protect bodily autonomy to save women and girls from mental and physical violence.

Numerous South African writers have taken up the subject of apartheid, attempting to expose the horrific reality of the system. However, in addition to exposing the appalling aspects of Apartheid, Gordimer started a movement that gave women more authority by entrusting them with the revolution's flames. Thenjiwe Mtinsto, an activist, stated, "the problem is that black women are not yet politicized enough to realize that we are in a state of war," in reference to women's participation in the fight against Apartheid. Regretfully, women have lagged men in terms of development (Goodwin, 22). In this chaotic environment, Gordimer gave her female characters a political role that transcended color bias, shining a beacon of hope for women residing in states impacted by racial inequality.

Gordimer seems as concerned with feminism as with humanism. She says that she is as much a feminist as a humanist. She tries to bring the reformatory changes in the theme of her work by creating more or less balanced roles to both men and women. To bring change in the social, political and cultural contexts of the country, she has inculcated revolutionary thoughts in both the male and female characters in her novels. But Gordimer has never admitted her work as feministic. She says that "A feminist novel is one conceived with the idea of proving something about women (CNG 297). She says that she is a writer who happens to be a woman, not a woman "writer", that is, "somebody who is setting out to make a point about being a woman" (CNG,

298). She has in the past called feminist issues “piffling” and has asserted that feminism has no role to play in South African politics (*CNG*, 203). But there are many paradoxical views and happenings in her novel which challenge her stance on feminism.

Sheila Roberts states that in her fiction Gordimer has “by-passed the decades of feminist movements greatest literary activity and has since the fifties established female protagonists whose lives must be taken seriously.” Dorothy Driver remarks that throughout her fiction Gordimer

Makes enough statements for us to acknowledge her interest in the debased status of women in society, and her recent admission {1981} that she has become “much more radical” both “as a woman and a citizen” ... authorizes us not simply to look for a recent development of feminist thought but to doubt that this feminist impulse has ever been absent. (Driver, 184)

Feminism in South Africa is intertwined with the politics of race, cultural issues, and sexuality. Gordimer believed that struggle against racism is the most significant thing of all issues including sexism in South Africa. White women in South Africa have all the privileges like the white men and have far better life than the black women. Black women never compare themselves with the white women, but they do so with oppression the black men are suffering from. Though the white women are unhappy about the poor living conditions of the blacks, they cannot compromise on the comforts that they enjoy in their bourgeois marriages. The issue is portrayed in some of Gordimer's earlier novels. But *My Son's Story* intertwined feminist concerns with political ones in its story by involving Hannah, a white woman, in fight against the racial segregation in South Africa. It is nothing but a clarion call to the white women to come out and fight against the white patriarchal society to eradicate apartheid. It can be observed that growing social and political consciousness and responsibility of a female protagonist is the core issue of Gordimer's novels which is lucidly found in *My Son's Story*.

It is a story of a colored school master, Sonny, whose story is told by Will, his son who is the author of this novel. Sonny is the pride of the family and community as he gets educated and becomes a teacher unlike his forefathers who have worked in mines. When he marries Aila, he has felt that she is equally distinctive as he has distinction in studies and shows respect towards her. The couple wants to live a meaningful and useful life by being responsible to the community. He is a voracious reader and lover of Shakespeare. His bookcase contains Marx, Lenin, Fanon, Gandhi, Nkrumah, Mandela, Biko, Kafka and D.H. Lawrence. He has made a lot of useful efforts to upgrade the conditions of the school as well as the children. He gives priority to self-respect which he has taught to his school children. The attempts to keep up his self-respect have driven him from personal to public activity, imprisonment, and trial. He has two children, Will and Baby. He is an exemplary father and husband, keeping everything in good order in the house as well as life. Though they cannot go to many places in that apartheid period,

he has not made his children aware of it by 'forming a charmed circle' around their lives. He is well aware of the happenings in the segregated society, humiliation, deprivation that the blacks are experiencing but he has confined the children and himself to the community projects.

Sonny faced a challenge when the school children started boycotting the classes by carrying slogans written on cardboard. By correcting the wrongly spelt words on the placards, he has shown solidarity with the children's cause and finally is arrested by the police and even dismissed from the job. Then he becomes a regional executive to a newly formed local committee and starts convening meetings and making speeches to bring awareness and confidence in the downtrodden society. As a part of campaign, when he decides to shift the family to an area where the whites live, for Aila, who is already living an orderly life, it is an uprooting of her ordered and disciplined life. Sonny's participation in illegal gatherings and political involvement leads him to imprisonment. Aila has shown a lot of courage and responsibility in such a situation, and often meets her husband in jail and writes letters to him conveying mundane family matters to which he is indifferent.

Hanna's visit to prison is a surprise to Sonny and he gets elated to get secret messages in an abstract form from her. She is a fleshy, blond activist of an international human rights organization, who meets the detainees and their families to offer help to them. When he is released, his relationship with her brings a new kind of joy. He finds in her both a friend and a lover. She fulfills his need for erotic fun and shows him that it is right in the concentration of political activity. His relationship with her makes him selfish and compromises on his ideal of self-respect. His teenage son, Will finds out about his love affair with Hannah, while entering a theatre. He cannot bear it and cannot do anything except turn into a protective cocoon to his innocent mother. Baby takes part in parties, takes drugs, even attempts suicide and finally leaves home and also the country. But Aila maintains her quiet, good, composed attitude to the unexpected turn of events.

The deadly silence between the couple enhances the gap between them. With his increased intimacy with Hannah, he distances himself from Aila and he does not know what she is doing and how she has got passport and a visa to visit Baby. But his subconscious mind is guilty of his activities. Thus, his affair creates a destructive force at the center of his happy family.

Baby's leaving home to join the military wing of the movement is shocking news to Sonny, but he does not get any information from his wife, Aila who maintains a very quiet and dignified yet sorrowful demeanor. Gradually she becomes a confidante to her daughter Baby, who secretly involves herself in the struggle and finally goes to Zambia with her activist boyfriend, whom she marries later. Aila's continuous trips to Zambia to see her daughter and her child provoke her to have clandestine involvement in the struggle. To the great amazement of Sonny and Will, it is revealed to them only when she is arrested. By this time Sonny's reputation in political struggle has already declined because of his personal immoral attitude. Hannah has also got a promotion in her work, and she goes to another country. Aila shows her commitment to the movement

through her stoic attitude during her political trial, skips bail to live in exile which is confusing to both Sonny and Will. There they lose her permanently.

Though the novel is essentially a critique of Racism, it is a story about gender relations observed within the domestic structure with implications for further changes nationwide. The title *My Son's Story* displays tangled family relationships and gives different allusions about their meaning. The novel is the story of Will, the son, or perhaps of Son/ny, the father, and it may also refer to Aila, who is mother to son Will and wife to husband, Son/ny. And the novel has two narrative voices. One is the angry voice of young Will and the other unnamed is a very thoughtful, detached voice which appreciates Hannah's decency, catches Will's anger, and analyses Sonny's strengths and weaknesses. Susan Greenstein holds that the second voice is "Will himself, slightly older than the angry adolescent, and having authored his first novel."

Whatever it is at the end, Aila gradually occupies the prominent role. She transforms herself from a quiet and unfathomable woman to a distinctive revolutionary who works for a Noble cause. Even Baby also takes hold of conditions, actively participates in political activities, goes into exile, gets married and has a baby of her own to claim her motherhood. Thus, the story is an anecdote of Aila and Baby who have been liberated from oppression. This is the success of women characters. Thus, Gordimer has highlighted their roles by bringing change in their lives and beliefs.

Sexism which prevails in the novel can be clearly seen in the thoughts of male characters Sonny and Will. They never analyze Aila's strengths and possibilities. They have such prejudiced notions about women that they focus on their physical beauty and feminine refinement. She is always treated as too delicate a creature to handle things in public and she is valued and sometimes even blamed for offering care besides quiet support. Hence Sonny, when he comes to know about her plan to go to Zambia to see Baby, is baffled and feels that she does not like journeys and cannot interact with the officials properly. Will also think that his mother is very weak and cannot bear to learn about the news about her husband's love affair. Hence, he feels that he should protect her by concealing the matter from her. Hence, they are shocked when they learn about the dangerous and daring involvement of Aila in the struggle. It is more dangerous than Sonny's involvement as it is involved with weapons rather than words. Even Will also understands how his mother has become free of conventional family ties by cutting her long and luxurious hair into a short, boyish style. He has understood that he will never come back as she is going to do something good.

Sonny's great oratory and ANC Spokesperson ship is displaced by Aila's realistic revolutionary activities in the resistance. His personal need for Hannah affects his political life. He tries to save Hannah when the police start firing in a political funeral ceremony which is attended by both. He even neglects helping a man who has got head injury by a bullet since his mind is clouded by selfishness. He thinks,



To run or to stop: a choice between them. Who was to say which was the most valuable? But this woman whose hand was curled against his neck, was not she oneself, his need?  
Saved himself. Now he had something he would never speak, not to anyone, certainly not to her. *MSS*, 126-127

While Sonny degrades himself as a person as well as a public figure, Hannah maintains balance both in her personal and political life. Though she loves Sonny much, she gives utmost importance to her job of helping the activists. As a result, when she gets a new assignment, she goes abroad by leaving Sonny almost at the same time when Aila goes into exile by skipping bail. While Sonny struggles with his secret private life, Aila has used her devotion and commitment to root out racial segregation by becoming a secret agent to a political agency, thus she occupies central part of the story. The changes in personal and political lives gradually lead the women characters Aila and Baby to recognize about their inner strength and intelligence and change themselves from the passive domestic roles to those of active political activists. Thus, Gordimer has entangled a public and political narrative story with gender relations through which continued growth of women in consciousness is shown.

Personal to Public is another theme of the novel. Sonny unlike his forefathers gets educated well and becomes a teacher to reform the society. He believes in living a useful life. He reads voraciously and helps the people to provide quality of life to the school as well as community. Self-respect is his credo which moves him from thoughtful private life to public sphere. He is a loving husband and caring father, creating a charmed circle round his children in the apartheid period. Though he has limited himself to community projects, the school children's rebellion against the white rule has challenged him and gradually dragged him into the movement. When he is approached to form a local committee, his life is completely changed, making him a public figure. He is elected a regional executive and starts making speeches. His participation in illegal meetings, political involvement and promotion of boycotts gets him imprisoned. But his friendship with Hannah degenerates his laudable position in the political resistance. He could not help the bloodied boy who was shot simply because of personal selfishness to take care of Hannah. Thus, he reaches the stage of compromising on his ideal of self-respect. The feeling of 'Needing Hannah' makes him long desperately for her. That is the reason why he is suspected and felt unreliable among the activists and consequently has lost his distinguished position whereas Aila, his wife, who is very meek, supports her family by studying for higher qualification and working. Though she is confined to her family, gradually the disturbed personal life has made her turn towards public to serve the cause of uplifting the blacks. Even Baby, Sonny's daughter, who is happy with her parents in childhood is slowly enticed by the revolutionary activities and has absorbed herself in resistance movement while the male characters Sonny, the father and will, the son are mere spectators to the unprecedented happenings. Thus, Gordimer describes how private life is entangled with public life in South Africa in *My Son's Story*.

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