

Portrayal Of Apartheid And The Psychological Conflicts Of Colonial Heroine In Nadine Gordimer's The Lying Days

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Abstract

Apartheid, in South Africa, is recorded as one of the cruelest acts in the history of South Africa in which the native Africans lost their identity and dominated by the colonial people. Exceptional Colonial white people with humanitarian attitude supported the native Africans. They had to face mental agonies after witnessing the severity of Apartheid rules and its impacts. Nadine Gordimer, the most eminent world famous writer brought such truths to the spotlight in her writings. This research paper aims to focus on the effects of Apartheid and the psychological journey of the colonial heroine portrayed by her in the novel *The Lying Days*.

Key Words: Apartheid, colonialism, racism, inner journey and quest for freedom.

Introduction

The apartheid rules created turbulent effects in South Africa since 1940s. It has been prevalent in the South Africa despite of colonialism. The word Apartheid is an African word that means separation or apartness among different races. South African people were classified into different groups based on their complexion, socio-economic status and cultural lifestyle as Blacks, Whites, Coloureds and Indians.

Various acts of Apartheid discriminate people in the native land. Blacks are the most oppressed community who have been treated brutally during the Apartheid regime. Apartheid system mainly aims to create walls among the people in which they have lost their oneness, leading to the feeling of discrimination.

Apartheid is one of the most conspicuous themes of Gordimer's works, in which she has depicted the real situation of South African society. Her novels portray tumultuous effects of Apartheid among people in the nation. Racial prejudices, survival issues, cultural clashes, psychological tensions, search for identity, displacement, exile, love, friendship, loyalty and above all humanism are

considered to be the significant themes of her writings.

Gordimer mostly used white protagonists in her novels. She sketched the South African Apartheid society through their eyes. Mostly, at the beginning of the novels, the protagonists were unaware of the racial systems imposed on the people. The maturity of the character occurs only when they get into contact with the other races of people in their life. Such juncture in their lives led them to the next level of attaining true knowledge of the society in which they exist.

Helen Shaw, the white protagonist of the novel raised in the mining town of South Africa. Her father is a secretary in Atherton gold mine. He is privileged by the people around, mainly because of his power and race. The main plot of the novel concentrates on the life journey of Helen Shaw. In short, it is a Bildungsroman novel.

Helen Shaw is trapped with the conventional values imposed by her parents. Being a white, she is not allowed to have friendship with other race people. In the opening of the novel, there is an argument between Helen and her mother for staying alone

in her parents' absence. Helen's mother warns her: "You know I can't leave you on your own, the girl's out." Yes, I knew that, an unwritten law so sternly upheld and generally accepted that it would occur to no child to ask why: a little girl must not be left alone because there were native boys about" (4).

It clearly shows that Helen's mother is afraid to leave Helen alone in the home due to her pre-opinion about the native boys around them. The restrictions and mysteriousness around Helen is not understood by her. This is because of her parents' influence upon her with conventional values. Mostly, she is not much aware of the society in which she lives in. The life of the whites and the blacks are different. Her unawareness is described: "There our house was, and I lived in it as I lived in my body. I was not aware of the shape of it, of its existence as a building the way the school existed or the houses in the town; nor of its relation to the other houses of the mine about it and again the town about them" (18). Though she is unaware of the surroundings in which she lives, she has got the curiosity to know about her society. She does not find freedom to know about the society, to mingle with all races of people and to live as per her wish due to the restrictions framed by her parents. The main reason they tell Helen is race.

Racism is one of the dominating factors of society and its people. In this novel, *The Lying Days*, Nadine Gordimer deals with the problems of the South African people after the change of government in 1948. Colour-consciousness was natural to white people and it had become a barrier for them to come out from the horrible racist society. Naturally, it is the biggest obstacle for them to get along with all the races of mankind.

Since racism plays a dominant role in the African society, Gordimer exemplifies the real happenings of the society in her debut novel *The Lying Days*. She depicts not only the tragic situations of the blacks in South Africa but also the whites, which means they are stridden away from the blacks because of their upbringing of their parents, colour-consciousness, schools, colleges, universities and other public places.

They lack knowledge about their society as a consequence of their community people. For Helen Shaw, when she visited the mining town alone in the beginning part of the novel, the atmosphere was entirely new to her. Even though she had been living in the mine town, the town seems to be different to her because of not having freedom to visit the places joyfully. In her parents' absence, she visited the town alone and observed the things around and near her. Actually, she liked the feeling of feeling free during her leisure time by being alone. She feels: "I liked the feeling of the space, empty about me, the unfamiliarity of being alone" (8). She sees the natives and lifestyle. "There were dozens of natives along the path. Some lay on the burned grass, rolled in their blankets, face down, as if they were dead in the sun. Others squatted and stood about shouting, passed on to pause every few yards and shout back something else" (9).

Even though she belongs to the white community, she has not been familiar with all the famous fairy tales popular among their community. In her childhood, fairy tales are replaced by the stories of the children from the ordinary domestic adventures. She has read the stories of the native children and their life in the story books which she also witnesses in her everyday life at her home through Anna, a native servant.

Anna, a native girl does household works of Helen Shaw. Helen could witness all such masterly attitude of white characters and the slave like native characters in stories. Helen observes: "Anna who did the housework and the cooking and called the mother and father Missus and Baas" (LD 11).

But Helen Shaw does not find any sort of characters in any stories. The problems of the native people are highlighted in numerous tales. But, there is no character like Helen. Helen feels: "I had never read a book in which I myself was recognizable" (LD 11). It gives an idea of searching by herself for herself. However, she says:

Yet now as I stood in this unfamiliar part of my own world knowing and flatly accepting it as the real world because it was ugly and did not exist in books (if this

was the beginning of disillusion, it was also the beginning of colonialism: the identification of the unattainable distant with the beautiful, the substitution of “overseas”, for “fairyland”). (LD 11)

The survival and the life of blacks and the whites are different not because of their diverged culture, but mainly because of colonialism. From her childhood itself, Helen has the habit of observing things and happenings around her. Though, initially she is unable to identify the real things around her, gradually she finds the pathetic situation of the oppressed community. Rarely, in the mining town, serious accidents take place. The partiality is shown even in publishing the news too. The natives are oppressed and unrecognised in their native country. It is observed by Helen in the novel: When a white man was killed, the papers recorded the tragedy, giving his name and occupation and details of the family he left. If no white man was affected, there was an item headed: “FATAL FALL OF HANGING. There was a fall of hanging at the East Shaft of Basilton Levels, East Rand, at 2 P.M. yesterday. Two natives were killed, and three others escaped with minor injuries. (LD 23)

This is the state of the blacks during Apartheid. And also, In the Atherton Mine, the native workers are not provided with proper food. So they indulged in strike to get good food.

When Helen enters into her adolescence, she is able to understand the difference between the personal and social life. She started analysing the role of her father and mother. She feels that her life seems to be familiar with her mother's. The only dissimilarity she notices is that age, emotional experience and her balance towards her family. Her father's life as a mine secretary is different.

Helen develops her reading habit by seeing her mother who has bought many books in her adult's ticket. But those books are about the life of the poor in England and which is far away from their South African society. Her mother sometimes expresses her uncertainty of such books. She

believes in the concept of one's understanding of life.

She advises her: “I don't believe a girl should group up not knowing what life is like” (LD 32). She was confused once she completed her schooling. She feels: “Over the water hole, the whole world was repeated, upside down. It all seemed simple, as if a puzzle had dissolved in my hands” (LD 35).

The protagonist's life in the mining town was not a liberated one. She becomes confused and does not have any idea about her future. At the same time, she tries to be independent and searches herself inwardly. The opening part of the novel concentrates on the life of Helen Shaw in the mining town. As she has been brought in closed circumstances, she does not find any opportunity to know about the society she lives in. From the beginning of the novel itself, Helen feels she has been controlled by her parents. After she completes her schooling, she has spent the vacation in Mrs. Koch's home, situated near the sea. Mrs. Koch is her mother's old friend who has come to Johannesburg to spend the holidays. It was a new place to Helen: “I stood at the window in a pause between the open suitcase and the open wardrobe with a misty mirror, feeling the beat of the train in my blood, the cessation of the train's noise in my ears. There was a withdrawal of sound like tidal silence pulling away at the touch of a spiral shell to one's ear; the sound of the sea” (LD 42).

She has Ludi Koch, Alice Koch's son who becomes intimate with her. He is an army man with ambition and he helps her mother in the farm. They converse with each other and their physical intimacy increases too. She feels delightful with Ludi. He advises Helen. When they talk about the mine life, he says: “I hope not. I know there isn't much life for young people there, but the sea and...” (LD 46). Pradnya Vijay Ghorpade, in his article observes the transformation of Helen Shaw: Gordimer's first novel *The Lying Days* concerns the partial growth and acquisition of race consciousness of its female protagonist, Helen Shaw, through adolescence and young adulthood. She grows up in the conventional home at her middle-class parents in a mining town, just outside Johannesburg. Helen's incipient rebellion

against the materialist values of her parents is also articulated through the figure of Ludi Koch. (Women as Political Activists) Her company with Ludi Koch has taught her about life. Her restricted life in mine town is changed with a pleasant days with Ludi. He is a man with goals and his personality which impressed Helen so much; it also induces boldness in Helen during her adulthood. Ludi said to her: "I don't want 'get on'. I'm happy where I am. All I want is the war to end so that I can get back here" (LD 30).

His qualities inspired Helen Shaw. Ludi physically as well as psychologically awakened. Accordingly, she continues to write letters to Ludi after her coming back to the mine town too.

... For while believing that I was living Ludi's way of life by keeping aloof from that of my home and the Mine, I had all the time been creating a third way of my own, as unconsciously as a spider salivates his thin silver lifeline of survival. The frailty of dreams, imagination and memory was changed and churned by some unsuspected emotional digestion into a vanity and cultivation myself. Like most finished products, nothing could have resembled less the raw material of emotion from which it was processed. And also, like most survival changes, it was accomplished by personality, unrecognized and unrealized by the conscious mind. (90)

Helen's childhood to adulthood was carefully crafted by Gordimer in the novel. Her demanding freedom from her parents in her childhood, her interests, searching for herself and her pleasant days with Ludi Koch gave her learning experiences in her life journey. Mainly, the in this novel, Gordimer focuses on the problems of youth. Joan Pollack describes the novel *The Lying Days* as "alive, bright and inquiring" and expresses his admiration on its "handling... the problems of youth [while] still maintaining the beauty and adventure of life" (Petersburg Progress Index).

Along with the major theme of racial issues and apartheid, Gordimer contemplates over the young white protagonist's problems in life journey. Especially she ponders on the

psychological journey of the heroine in the racial society. As it is a coming of the age novel, she points out the major issues faced by the white middle class youngsters in South Africa. It is evident that the impacts of Apartheid led the colonial heroine of this novel into depression.

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