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RESEARCH ARTICLE



RACE, POWER AND IDENTITY IN NADINE GORDIMER'S NOVEL *MY SON'S STORY*

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ABSTRACT



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Nadine Gordimer's novel *My Son's Story* (1990), published during the final years of apartheid, explores the complex relationship between race, identity, family, and political commitment in South Africa. This paper investigates the novel by examining the interconnected themes of race, power, hybridity, moral ambiguity, gender, and identity. Using the postcolonial frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper argues that Gordimer depicts apartheid not solely as a political entity but as a mechanism that significantly transforms interpersonal connections and psychological identities. Special attention is given to Sonny's transformation from schoolteacher to political activist and to Aila's understated yet powerful role as an embodiment of ethical resistance. The paper concludes that *My Son's Story* continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of race, migration, identity politics, democracy, and social justice.

Keywords: *Nadine Gordimer, Apartheid, Postcolonial Literature, Identity, Hybridity, Race, Power, Homi K. Bhabha, Gender, Political Resistance*

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INTRODUCTION

Nadine Gordimer is one of the foremost literary voices of apartheid South Africa. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. In her fiction, she continually interrogated racial oppression, political injustice, and the moral complexities of South Africa's struggle for democracy. She feels that even the most private shelves, in the most private situations, are " what they are because political situations regulate their lives. You see, in South Africa, society is political situations." (Contemporary Novels 543) Her fiction shows that history is never encountered in the abstract, but is always rooted in the emotions, choices, and moral struggles of ordinary people.

RESEARCH GAP

While scholars have done much to examine *My Son's Story* as an anti-apartheid text, little attention has been paid to its continued importance within contemporary postcolonial literary criticism. Recent theoretical advances in hybridity, identity, representation, gender, and ethical citizenship open up new interpretative possibilities for reading the novel. This paper, therefore, attempts to re-read *My Son's Story* through these critical perspectives. It argues that Gordimer depicts apartheid as a system that affects not only political institutions but also the psychological, emotional, and ethical dimensions of human existence.

APARTHEID, HISTORY, AND GORDIMER'S POLITICAL VISION

In 1948, after the general election, the South African National Party formally established apartheid, a system of racial segregation enforced through a wide

range of legal, political, educational, and economic regulations. The Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, the Pass Laws, and the Bantu Education Act kept racial groups apart and ensured that whites kept their political and economic dominance. Black South Africans and the Coloured and Indian communities faced widespread discrimination in employment, education, housing, healthcare, and political participation.

The effects of apartheid extended far beyond the legal segregation. It produced a social order regulated by the state itself regarding identity. Official racial classifications were imposed, dictating people's opportunities, movements, occupations, and relationships. This institutionalised discrimination fostered not only political resistance but also deep psychological fragmentation. Thus, for those living under apartheid, the key questions were belonging, citizenship, dignity, and identity.

This is the historical context in which Nadine Gordimer forged her literary vision. Her engagement with the African National Congress (ANC) and her resistance to apartheid deeply influenced her literary imagination. Instead of presenting heroes and villains in black and white, she shows morally complex individuals trying to reconcile political ideals with personal obligations. This ethical complexity accounts for Gordimer's difference from many contemporary political novelists and for her continuing relevance in postcolonial literary studies.

My Son's Story (1990) captures the uncertainties of the transitional moment in South Africa. The novel neither celebrates political victory nor condemns apartheid, but rather probes the emotional and moral fallout of living in a society in a state of radical



flux. By situating political conflict in the domestic realm, Gordimer exposes the damage apartheid does not only to nations but also to families, friendships, marriages, and selfhood.

RACE, IDENTITY, AND POWER IN *MY SON'S STORY*

My Son's Story is about the complex relationship between race and identity. The tensions are shown in the novel's main protagonist, Sonny. He is a coloured school teacher and holds an ambiguous position in the South African racial hierarchy. He has some rights that are denied to Black South Africans. However, he is still excluded from the social, political, and cultural privileges that are the exclusive province of the white minority. This middle social position produces a constant identity crisis. Sonny is not quite in either world, and his personal development is a reflection of the contradictions in apartheid's racial classifications.

At first, his education seems to provide social mobility. Becoming the first literate member of his family is a personal achievement, a symbol of hope, progress, and intellectual empowerment. But apartheid immediately shatters these hopes. Sonny is qualified to be a white teacher, but he is paid less, has fewer opportunities, and receives less professional recognition. His exclusion from public libraries and cultural institutions further demonstrates that only intellectual achievement cannot surpass structurally imposed racial discrimination.

Gordimer thus shows how apartheid functions not only through economic disparity but also through the deliberate destruction of human dignity. Sonny's gradual political consciousness stems from his

recognition that individual accomplishment cannot compensate for social injustice.

His transformation from teacher to activist thus is more than a matter of political radicalisation. It indicates a shift in the meaning of identity itself. Personal advancement is meaningless in a society that remains fundamentally unequal. Thus, Gordimer presents political consciousness as an ethical response to systemic injustice rather than as an ideological commitment.

SONNY: POLITICAL RESISTANCE AND MORAL AMBIGUITY

Gordimer's great success in *My Son's Story* is her refusal to found political resistance on simplistic notions of heroism. Sonny is not shown as the perfect revolutionary or as an ordinary victim of apartheid. Instead, he embodies the moral ambiguities of political commitment in societies structured by systemic oppression. His life shows that resistance is not only public but also a deeply personal experience of sacrifice, contradiction, and ethical conflict.

Gordimer's painstaking descriptions of Sonny's political awakening show that this is not an epiphany but a gradual progression through a series of injustices. Witnessing the educational injustices that Black and coloured students face, participating in community projects, and confronting the violence of state repression, he comes to understand neutrality as a form of complicity. His move from educator to activist is therefore not simply political radicalisation, but an ethical response to institutional injustice.

But Gordimer is not going to romanticise political activism. Sonny becomes a public figure, and this puts emotional distance even in his own family. His



political commitments intrude on his personal life, creating tensions between his roles as husband, father, and community leader. The novel repeatedly poses the question of whether public liberation can justify private suffering. Instead of providing definitive answers, Gordimer reveals the painful intersections of collective struggle and individual responsibility.

This moral ambiguity is most fully expressed in Sonny's relationship with Hannah, a white human rights activist. They share a common background in political resistance, but their emotional bond grows into an intimate relationship that greatly upsets Sonny's family. Gordimer consciously complicates the reader's response by refusing to present the affair as a question of personal betrayal or romantic fulfillment. Instead, it becomes another example of the psychological fragmentation bred by apartheid.

Sonny's relation to Hannah embodies the contradictions of political liberation. Both characters are dedicated to the cause of dismantling racial injustice, but struggle to lead ethical lives in their personal lives. Public commitment does not automatically ensure private virtue. Hence, Gordimer's challenge to the traditional images of revolutionary heroism is to prove that political leaders remain susceptible to the usual human weaknesses, desires, and moral failings.

Sonny's choices have consequences that reach far beyond his own emotional life. The son, Will, is heartbroken by his father's infidelity, while the daughter, Baby, withdraws from the family and later joins the armed struggle. Sonny grows into an influential political figure, but his domestic relationships go awry. Gordimer thus shows how

historical change often requires personal sacrifices whose emotional fallout cannot be easily compensated for by political success.

Viewed from the vantage point of a modern ethic, Sonny exemplifies what philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls the complexity of moral agency, in which conflicting obligations do not lend themselves to facile resolution. Gordimer does not make him into a hero or a villain, but a very human being caught between loyalties. His political courage is never in doubt, but his personal failures remind readers that the people who make up liberation movements are themselves morally flawed.

Instead of ideological certainties, Sonny's story is an exploration of ethical responsibility. Gordimer illustrates that the fight against oppression does not negate the banal dilemmas of love, family, guilt, and accountability. Instead, political struggle often exacerbates these conflicts, exposing the tenuous boundary between public virtue and private vulnerability.

AILA: GENDER, SILENCE, AND ETHICAL RESISTANCE

While Sonny is at the center of political activism, Aila is one of Gordimer's most important but often underappreciated literary achievements. Contemporary feminist critique has become more and more aware that Aila is an example of an alternative form of resistance, which is not based on public speeches or revolutionary leadership, but on emotional resilience, ethical consistency, and quiet endurance. In Aila, Gordimer expands the very definition of political resistance beyond patriarchal narratives of heroism.



Initially, Aila seems to fit the role of a traditional wife-mother. She runs the household, raises her children, encourages Sonny's political career, and holds the family together in times of financial difficulty and political persecution. But beneath the domesticity, as Gordimer makes clear, is a formidable emotional strength and a moral independence.

Unlike many literary representations of politically marginalised women, Aila is never reduced to passive victimhood. She feels the sting of Sonny's emotional betrayal deeply, but she will not allow herself to wallow in self-pity or seek revenge. Instead, she carries private pain with extraordinary dignity. Her resilience becomes an ethical force, quietly defying patriarchal authority and political idealism.

However, Sonny and Aila are especially important. Sonny's activism is public in nature, in the form of speeches, leadership of organisations and political mobilisation. Conversely, Aila's resistance is born in the domestic sphere through sacrifice, endurance and moral consistency. Both types of resistance, Gordimer suggests, are essential. Indeed, the stability that enables Sonny's political career is largely maintained through Aila's invisible labour.

From a feminist perspective, Aila undermines traditional assumptions about power. Political history is quick to celebrate charismatic male leaders and slow to recognise the female emotional labour that sustains families and communities in times of social upheaval. Gordimer deliberately reverses this trend, giving Aila more narrative importance as the novel goes on.

This change is particularly noticeable when Aila voluntarily joins the underground resistance. Sonny

and the reader are surprised by her involvement because it runs counter to traditional gender expectations. Thus, as Gordimer demonstrates, political consciousness is formed in many ways. Resistance does not have to be loud, oppositional, or publicly acknowledged. It can also happen in the silence of courage, responsibility, and moral conviction.

Contemporary feminist scholars have increasingly read Aila as the moral centre of the novel. Sonny's public reputation becomes more complicated by personal paradoxes, while Aila is ever-present with integrity, compassion, and resilience. Her strength is not political but an ironclad commitment to family, justice, and human dignity.

This reading is in resonance with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's thinking on marginalised voices. Spivak suggests that the dominant history is often deaf to those who produce outside the hegemonic power structure of the institution. Aila is the very person. She seldom commands public attention, but her emotional stamina and moral courage are crucial to family survival and political resistance.

Thus Gordimer de-centres the conventional heroic narrative. Instead of looking for political significance only in public leadership, she sees the power of care, sacrifice, and moral responsibility to transform. In doing so, she broadens readers' understanding of resistance itself.

Ultimately, the novel suggests, political revolutions cannot succeed without the invisible work that is happening within homes and communities. Aila's tale reminds readers that history is made not only by celebrated leaders but also by



those whose quiet resilience keeps the possibility of social transformation alive.

IDENTITY, HYBRIDITY, AND THE "THIRD SPACE"

One of the most fruitful ways to read *My Son's Story* in the present is through Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity. Bhabha argues that colonial societies produce identities that exist in a "Third Space" in which cultural meanings are not fixed or absolute but are unstable, negotiated, and constantly reconstructed.

Sonny is an example of this hybrid state, as a coloured South African, he has an ambivalent position between the privileged white minority and the oppressed Black majority. He is not fully of one community or the other. His identity, then, is one of instability rather than certainty. Apartheid seeks to impose rigid racial categories, but Gordimer shows how lived identities always go beyond the artificial classifications.

Sonny's professional education, political activism, family relations, and cultural aspirations all point to the precariousness of colonial identity. Educated in institutions imbued with colonial values, he gradually repudiates the ideological assumptions that support racial domination. His transformation is an example of the emergence of what Bhabha calls new cultural identities that are negotiated, not inherited with certainty.

Similarly, Stuart Hall's influential theory of identity as constantly produced rather than permanently possessed illuminates Gordimer's representation of her characters. Identity is never presented as either biologically determined or culturally fixed. Rather, it develops through history,

memory, political experience, and relationships between people. Sonny, Will, Baby, Hannah, and Aila are all deeply altered as apartheid alters the way they see themselves and others.

Gordimer also contests the binary opposition of oppressor and oppressed. Hannah, part of the privileged white community, rejects apartheid and commits to human rights activism. In contrast, Sonny's personal flaws are a barrier to presenting political activists as morally perfect. Such narrative complexity reinforces the novel's rejection of ideological reductionism.

Through these unstable identities, Gordimer shows that apartheid is destructive, not only to political institutions but also to the human capacity to construct coherent identities. The novel thus becomes a deep meditation on belonging and dislocation, on memory and ethical selfhood.

CONTEMPORARY POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES: BEYOND APARTHEID

Although *My Son's Story* is set in the specific historical context of apartheid South Africa, the novel's literary significance extends beyond that political moment. Contemporary postcolonial criticism increasingly recognises the novel as an exploration of identity, memory, ethical responsibility and social justice continuing to have an impact within societies experiencing racial conflict, migration, political polarisation and cultural fragmentation. Gordimer's achievement is to make a historically specific story into a universal meditation on the legacy of systemic oppression.

Gordimer's novel is concerned with the subtler psychological effects of power rather than the



institutional structures that are the staple of much political fiction. Apartheid is understood not only as a legal system but as an ideological system that conditions language, memory, emotional relations, and moral consciousness. All individual choices in the novel are made against a backdrop of wider political realities. Gordimer demonstrates Michel Foucault's observation that power does not only operate through state institutions but also through quotidian social practices that govern individual behaviour and identity.

Similarly, the novel rejects rigid ideological categories. Rather than constructing a binary conflict of good victims and evil perpetrators, Gordimer constructs morally ambiguous characters whose decisions embody competing ethical obligations. Sonny's political integrity is inseparable from personal failure; Hannah's commitment to racial justice disrupts simple ideas of privilege; Aila's silent endurance redefines resistance itself. It is this complexity that distinguishes *My Son's Story* from previous protest literature and makes it akin to modern ethical criticism which emphasises ambiguity rather than certainty.

In addition, Gordimer repeatedly asks whether political liberation is sufficient to ensure individual freedom. Tearing down oppressive institutions does not in itself heal emotional wounds or repair broken identities. Liberation, rather, becomes an ethical process still requiring individuals to confront memory, guilt, reconciliation, and responsibility. This insight explains why the novel continues to connect with societies grappling with the shadows of colonialism, civil conflict and systemic discrimination.

THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF *MY SON'S STORY*

More than three decades after its publication, *My Son's Story* remains vibrantly relevant to contemporary global realities. The political system of apartheid is officially dead, but many of the issues explored in the novel are still deeply relevant in a range of social and political contexts. Racial discrimination, migration, identity politics, nationalism, democratic citizenship, gender inequality and social exclusion remain at the heart of public debates globally.

The novel also makes significant contributions to democratic ethics. Gordimer shows that true democracy can not be achieved by constitutional change or political transition. Moral responsibility, social inclusion and recognition of common human dignity are required. Hence, political freedom has to be combined with ethical transformation for societies to overcome historical injustice.

CONCLUSION

Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* is one of the most sophisticated literary examinations of apartheid and its enduring effects on identity, family, and political consciousness. For Gordimer, apartheid is not merely a historical setting but a pervasive institutional oppression that penetrates every element of human life, determining personal relationships, ethical decisions, emotional identities, and cultural belonging.

The novel's biggest strength is its refusal to accept simple moral binaries. Sonny, Aila, Hannah and Will are placed in ethically complicated situations that make it impossible to draw easy lines between heroism and failure, victimhood and privilege, public



commitment and private responsibility. Gordimer's characters are richly realised, and they show that political liberation involves intense psychological and moral negotiations, far beyond institutional change.

Seen from the perspective of current postcolonial criticism, *My Son's Story* gains in significance when read with ideas of hybridity, identity formation, representation and ethical citizenship. Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the 'Third Space' allows us to understand the instability of Sonny's cultural identity, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on marginalised voices offer a deeper insight into Aila's quiet but transformative resistance. These theoretical perspectives reveal that Gordimer's novel is concerned not only with the politics of apartheid but with the larger human struggle for dignity, recognition and belonging.

Ultimately, *My Son's Story* transcends its historical moment to achieve a timeless meditation on justice, freedom, resilience, and moral responsibility. The continuing relevance to contemporary literary criticism attests to Gordimer's abiding contribution to postcolonial studies and world literature. In an era of continuing racial inequalities, forced migration, political polarisation and contested identities, the novel still challenges its readers to imagine more humane and inclusive forms of social coexistence.

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