

A Study of Colour Politics in Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*

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Abstract: Nadine Gordimer's tenth novel, *My Son's Story* (1990) deals with the issue of colour politics, and the concentrated groups of protagonists here are the coloured school teacher, Sonny and his family members. Being confined to a limited sphere by the apartheid laws, the 'coloured' family's encounter with the other members of the society specially the whites or others of their category seems to be imbalance and unhealthy. The term 'coloured' in the South African context is taken to mean 'mixed race', 'half-breed', or 'half-caste' between white and black ancestors. In the apartheid era, 'Coloured' persons as well as black people were segregated from the White community and were discriminated against in all social amenities, public places, educational establishments, occupations and industries.

Keywords: Black consciousness, colour, race, displacement

Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* revolves around the story of complex mental and physical suffering of a 'coloured' family just because of branding the colour phenomenon told by a 'coloured' narrator. The narrative voice of a 'coloured' boy shows the clear picture of true segregation fostered by apartheid norms and introduces a symbolically hybrid and cross-cultural force to counter the fixed identities which law structure has put in place in South African society. The focus on the 'coloured' family is significant precisely because the hybridism and the instability of the term 'coloured' facilitate the kinds of shift in identity and perception that the narrative envisages. Here, the symbolism of 'coloured' as a racial classification becomes extremely important because whatever might be the secondary factors but the primary matter of concern behind the working of this law is after all the issue of race and identity defined in terms of the 'colour' of one's skin, affecting people from all sections of life. In *My Son's Story*, Gordimer describes these complexes of relationships and drawbacks of the 'Coloured' identity and their position, space and voice in the larger society and political arena, amidst the pendulum of acceptance and rejection by the white racial supremacists. The 'coloured' boy's narrative expresses his deep consciousness of 'coloured' identity as a self divided between white and Black blood, which demonstrate the ambivalent condition of 'coloured' people in the country. The boy's discursive curse over the black pigment in his veins manifests the tensions surrounding the 'coloured' people's identity and daily hardships. Sonny's sense of identity is situated halfway between the real blacks on the one side and the whites on the other. He is in a position in which he can communicate with both the communities, although in rather different and unbalanced ways because the 'coloured' community comes from the white town and the blacks are removed from the 'coloured' community.

For this Sonny isolates himself from cultural events as well as political activities. In spite of his sense of responsibility and his admiration for the real blacks, Sonny's sense of equality does not involve him in the liberation movement before the school uprisings but lets him view it from a spectator's status as more of their affair but not as his own.

In establishing Sonny's distinctive character, Gordimer portrays his dark skin colour as a positive factor. Gordimer's concept of blacks and 'coloureds' as siblings in *My Son's Story* corresponds to the discourse of Black Consciousness, as it relates to black mobilization. The narrative describes Sonny's racial identity as black, especially when he faces the black uprisings at schools, and blurs the distinction between real black, black and 'coloured'. In defining the real blacks as siblings of the 'coloureds' the novel underlines black solidarity as a focus of political mobilization in the liberation movement. In this sense, the strength of the passage rests on its function in creating dual interpretations of the term 'coloured' and their double standard identity created out of the norms. Apart from her focus on the Coloured identity Gordimer's focus on the 'Coloured' family in *My Son's Story* is also a part of her thematic preoccupation with the politics of race, gender and sexuality as they are played out in the family and the wider public arena. The 'coloured' family in *My Son's Story* makes the symbolic move of crossing the border from the 'coloured' location in their hometown to a grey area in the white city of Johannesburg, from where working class Afrikaners move out for a higher grade of life. The family is offered a house by the committee to settle in among whites as a gesture in defiance of the law of the Group Areas Act. This move of the 'coloured' family into the grey area of the white city signifies the whole notion of 'coloured' identity as hybrid. The move into the white city also signals the beginning of the uncertain movement of the family in the novel. The various transformations of the family suggest the possibility of reinventing and relocating outside the apartheid creed and making the members reflect a sensitive awareness of a just, equal and humane society. The transformations within the 'Coloured' family are perceived from both the level of the omniscient narrator and the son's narrative. From the point at which the son learns of his father's affair with a white woman Hannah, the whole story starts to evolve around the deceptiveness of the appearances of the family's life. The narrative also demonstrates the dual meanings of events and perspectives. Will's narrative is necessitated by his father's secret life as he indicates in the final lines of the novel, 'What he did—my father—made me a writer. Do I have to thank him for that? Why couldn't I have been something else?' [Gordimer 2003:277].

The boy describes his position within the family and his task as a witness and a writer of the family's story. Writing his family story becomes a process of freeing himself from his bondage to his father and from his present difficult questions, bounded by troubles and hardships all around. Gordimer certainly demonstrates here some identification with the boy in terms of the position she is placed in within South Africa and the task she has taken up as a witness and a writer. *My Son's Story* makes the political commitment of the 'Coloured' protagonist a dynamic force of

transformation in the whole family. This perspective on the dynamic effect of political commitment is central to Gordimer's work of this period. It is in exploring the processes of this transformation that the multiple narratives demonstrate its nuances. Thus, the novel explores the central story of the 'Coloured' family's growth towards the political commitment and revolutionary movements marked by hardships, failed relationships, frustrations, deceptions etc. which are the hallmarks of life and humanly relationships under South African apartheid regime. By introducing a 'Coloured' identity in *My Son's Story*, Gordimer has created not only a new narrative voice of the 'other' but also a new cultural identity. Through her symbolic representation of 'Coloured' family and their transformation, she develops more dynamic and more complex values for 'coloured' identity. The cross-racial sexual and political relationship between the 'coloured' man and the white woman ironically creates dynamic energies of transgressions of moral and political codes that affect other members of the 'coloured' family. Guided by the strictures of colour politics, their relationship can be judged something which is fraud that does not have any possible conclusion. At many levels through the 'coloured' family's narratives and cross-sections of life at different occasions and at certain point of times in the novel Gordimer tries to show how life and relationship works while there are walls and boundaries all around. Because race determines so many other relationships in the broad spectrum of life in South Africa, the novel's deconstruction of the fixed category of race through the fluid symbolism of 'coloured' identity necessarily affects other categories of gender, sexuality and politics. The female characters are provided with more centralized and politicized roles as revolutionaries and subvert the conventional and negative images of women as marginalized victims of the society. The novel's deconstruction of the fixed categories represented by Aila's transformation as a revolutionary and by the reversal of the gender division and power relations between her and her husband can be read as an allegory of revolution, about how the relationships in various categories in the liberated future are to be brought about. As like in all Gordimer's fiction, *My Son's Story* is at one level a historical document of a society divided by the effects of apartheid system and it illustrates the process of the displacement of individuals. However, on another level, the novel is an attempt to construct a possible future for the society, one of cultural plurality, and to shape a new reality for a more liberated society. Aila's trans- territorial movement and her achievement of intercultural identity are symbolic of the new situation in a multiracial and cross-cultural society in post-apartheid South Africa. Her writing is thus an authentic witness to the past history anticipating from present implications the future developments of events and experiences and constructing imaginatively new realities of South Africa. A re-examination of the relations between literature and history is a characteristic of the post-modern writers like Gordimer. Amidst the backgrounds and situations of an extra-ordinarily large number of ethnically separate groups, a great divide between rich and poor, between whites and non-whites, land-owners and non-landowners, possibility of

everyday peaceful co-existence will depend a great deal on the general acceptance of different perspectives and attitudes towards the same singular realities i.e. the reality of new South Africa as a nation.

Gordimer's *My Son's Story* display how the politics of colour of the skin and power in South Africa are inextricably intertwined. Through imagination Gordimer explains many complex aspects of human lives. *My Son's Story* sheds light on the specific consequences of the historical circumstances of life in South Africa. This is why the perspective from which the story is told is essential to the meaning and richness of the message of the novel. A new dimension is added to the relationship of fiction and history, and this requires a new kind of representation of the images and messages; fragmentation, ambiguity, dislocation, gaps, etc, are not aims in themselves, but new means to convey new situations, new historical sites, and, ultimately, new perspectives. The present novel *My Son's Story* accumulates all the above testimonies and tries to find a way out for a possible and peaceful South Africa, though the scars and wounds of colour politics has ruined the emotions and psyche of peoples thronging from all walks of life.

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