The Dynamics of Violence: A Study of Selected Novels of Nadine Gordimer

Ramanpreet Kaur
Department of English and Cultural Studies
Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract

The Nobel Prize-winning author Nadine Gordimer explores in her fiction the effects and aftermath of South Africa’s apartheid system on both ruling whites and oppressed blacks. Although the political conditions of apartheid, which were in place from 1948 until 1990, are essential to the themes of her work, Gordimer focuses primarily on the element of violence that is generated by complex human tensions in the segregated society. This doctoral project is an analytical study of Nadine Gordimer’s selected fiction produced from 1974 to 1998. The study focuses on a selection of texts that are chronologically and thematically representative of three significant eras of historical and social change in contemporary South Africa. Two of the novels under examination are from the apartheid era, two belong to the period of transition, or interregnum, and while further two belong to the heading of recent ‘post-apartheid’ narratives.

There is a pertinent connection between the tone of Gordimer’s fiction and the deterioration of race relations and escalation of violence in her country. The theme of “Violence” in her fiction is developed in a dual way: at the physical level there is the systematic dehumanization, zombification of blacks, killings, beatings and brutality which reveals the social marginality and at the psychological level the themes of disgust, despair, paranoid behavior, madness, fear, hostility, shame, embarrassment and guilt leading to psychological alienation. However from the restricted identities generated by the apartheid, the black characters are awakened from their ignorance and all now well equipped to take the control of the situation.

The research methodology has involved an intensive and extensive study of the novels with psychological and cultural approaches with special focus on the origin, the nature, the causes and the effects of violence on the psyche and life of the characters. While looking into the origins and nature of violence in the fiction of Gordimer, the theories of eminent theorists G.W.F. Hegel, Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko and Rene Girard have been employed.
In the succession of three chapters there is developing process of violence; first chapter deals the perusal of her apocalyptic novels *The Conservationist* and *Burger’s Daughter* in which violence comes out of the land in the form of the black corpse and has taken deep roots in the lives of people living under the brutality of apartheid in which violence comes in the form of corpse of the dead black man who represents the dehumanized black population of ‘Location.’ In this chapter the element of violence is dealt with the help of the ideas of Fanon that he has incorporated in his seminal works *Black Skin White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* respectively.

The second chapter deals with futuristic novel *July’s People* and short fiction collection *Jump and Other Stories* which witness violence that is inflicted on whites by black community in the transitional phase of the country. In this phase the violence has brought everything in question ranging from roles, relations and even the spatial possessions; the master has become servant and servant has become master. Here she writes on the lines of thought propounded by GWF Hegel. On the social level it is the role reversal between the master and the servant whereas on the personal level it carries with it more than is visible on the surface. As Fanon claims the violence helps in the birth of colonized in a new era, in these books the black characters realize their worth and this phase celebrate the birth of a new conscious and able black who is now hailed as the savior of the previous ruling class.

In the third chapter violence has been analyzed with the help of the theory of mimetic violence propounded by Rene Girard. In this phase her novels deals with the legacy of apartheid which has left both the races vulnerable to violence. *None to Accompany Me* portrays a phase which deals with the equal distribution and reconstruction of the country. All these efforts are marred by the mimetic rivalry that has made the land a tug-of-war between both the races. On the other hand in *The House Gun* deals with the violence that has entered in the domestic sphere and it has re-formed itself in the form of intra-racial violence. The roots of violence are analyzed with help of the interplay of subject, object and model in the formation of mimetic rivalry. In this phase the debased and cornered black has come out of his shackles and come to the rescue of white class.