Chapter Five

Summation

South African literature witnessed the increasing social commitments of writers in the very process of articulating people’s collective consciousness against the struggles they have faced. The writers, through their works have exposed to the world the anguish of the social and political incarceration and its effect on people. In a hostile world, where modernity had already set to abduct the spirit of life of the individual, Gordimer analyses the occult problems of the miserable and wretched people of South Africa. The novelist presents her countrymen “as they wished to be seen at a time when they were not sure how to see themselves” (The Hindu 7). Throughout her career, Gordimer records the consciousness of her own time, as it has developed from the early 1950s to the present, with all its eddies and blockages, false dawns and dark nights, choosing material congenial to her personal. The novelist wishes such nightmarish living conditions to be wiped away from the face of the earth.

The novels of Gordimer rapidly changed the entire history of South Africa capturing the real picture of life in the forlorn continent. Historical events forming the backdrop of the novels, give a meaningful message to the public who monopolize the ideas and thoughts. The political, social and economic struggles of South Africa built up an extremely fresh fictional
world. The novels merely reflect the situation in the country and meditatively dabble in various alternatives which help to bring about transformation. Linda Weinhouse argues with Martin Trump that Gordimer is literally caught in a ‘split-historical’ position. She has come to identify herself with the causes of her black country men and yet, is legally and socially cut off from any form of repression of the commitment other than through her writing. True to the statement that a writer is part of the creative consciousness of society, Gordimer has traced the long saga of suffering undergone by the people of her country. The writer has chosen to remain quintessentially a South African writer, as one who reports from within. Thus, the encounter of Gordimer with politics has been largely through the medium of human relations.

The present study scrutinizes the political, social and cultural milieu of South Africa as presented in Gordimer’s select novels. The introductory chapter outlines the growth and development of African Literature, South African Literature and the surfacing of Black Literature. The contemporary writers who deal with the oppressed and neglected section of the society are discussed. The chapter analyses the position of Gordimer as a South African writer, her contribution to the literary world, outline of the plot of the novels selected, the relevance and scope of the study and recorded the review of the literature, the methodology adopted and the structure of the thesis.

Gordimer has repeatedly maintained that as a South African, her adherence lies with the country and she feels that as a writer, the novelist has
responsibility towards the place of her birth. As the dominant Whites acted
not in conformity with the truth of the indigenous people, encounter at the
regional and local levels abound in the African context. Novels of Gordimer
hold testimony to such hybrid and tense moments at the contact zone.
“Encounter Between the Private and the Public” comments on the power of
literature to make interventions between the private and the public sphere. The
novels are scrutinized in the radiance of New Historicism by relating the real
life situations in them with the historical issues and incidents. The author’s
immense attachment to her country and the native people, the past and the
present are reflected in them by attributing historical perspective. The novelist
highlights the individual psyche at the expense of historical reality.
Gordimer’s artistic sensibility has been primed and developed in conjunction
with her political sympathies as an individual. The political element could not
be divorced from the larger aesthetic or social issues as Gordimer is also a
writer of conscience. Blending history with psychology, *Burger’s Daughter*
traces the development of the protagonist Rosa’s psychological heroism in the
political context of the anti-apartheid struggle which outlines the protagonist’s
encounter between the private and the public. The function of a writer as a
historical witness lies in the way, she presents her ideology by problematising
the political movements of the late 1970s. Through the achievement of
psycho-historical consciousness in the marginalized female protagonist Rosa,
the novelist represents the most significant historical changes of South Africa,
beginning from the Sharpeville Massacre and ending with Black Conscious Movement which culminated as the Soweto Uprising in 1976.

More than targeting apartheid against which Gordimer’s ideology is fundamentally based, *Burger’s Daughter* testifies to the anti-apartheid movements of the time. It is an interpretation of and critical approach to such resisting forces as White Communism and the Black Conscious Movement which played functional roles in the educational development of the protagonist. As a historical testimony or a metaphoric interpretation cast in narrative form, *Burger’s Daughter* reflects the inner awareness of the historical setting of the late 1970s for which Rosa’s psychological development stands. Gordimer juxtaposes the movement of Black Consciousness of the 1970s with that of Communism which remained predominantly White.

The novelist had recorded the thirty-seven years history of South Africa enduring the devastating changes and the real events of South African history of the marginalized, the separated and fuming figures in the apartheid free new South Africa. The history of the country, as reflected in the novels exemplifies the necessity of retranslation and re-evaluation of the Black as well as the white codes for the society to reach a state of solidity, treasuring national unity. The past and the present of South Africa depicted in the novels portray the changes in the society and the societal members. The exigency, obligation, anxiety, feeling and experience that have hardened the lives of the
Black South Africans are portrayed in the historical scenario. The author dexterously describes the relationship between the private and the public by registering each stage of the history of South Africa. The writer exhibits an acute consciousness of the history of South Africa and the historical incidents that wrought the topography of the country. Thus the novels are true documents of the past, the present and the future of South Africa.

Gordimer associates the private and the public to the socio-political in the novels, thus making it possible to pursue the deterioration in the South African political situation throughout the writing career of more than five decades. The novels and short stories illustrate the growing hopelessness of the white minority in Africa. The involvement and sacrifice of the Whites such as Lionel, Mehring and Maureen who have dedicated themselves to the eradication of apartheid and their risk in future are also portrayed in the novels. The novelist ornately discusses the political issues which have provided shape and effect in their lives. *Burger’s Daughter* presents a perspective, unique to an insider, a person constantly in touch with peculiar situation exclusive to South Africa mingling together of the inner and the outer, the public and the private to pave way for political commitment. The incidents which add strength to the encounter between the private and the public illuminate the novels of Gordimer.

The political commitment of Gordimer is exhibited in the novels. Colonial dilemma and historical consciousness detailed in the novels of throw
light on the past and current political milieu, the status of the Blacks, the
Whites and the Coloureds in South African society. The author avows that
politics is the character of South Africa; political commitment and
involvement could only redeem the Blacks. In setting up the freedom struggle
of Africa as the backdrop of the novels like *Burger’s Daughter* and *July’s
People*, Gordimer skillfully amalgamates history, politics and fiction with a
prophetic vision. The pass laws created a great hazard for the Blacks. They
became no man in their own land and were denied the right to work without
the pass in their place and the miseries encountered by the natives are pictured
in the novels. The writer distills political events into personal pain, which
reverberates through the writing. Gordimer, with an artistic mingling of the
private and the public experience, commits herself to the political institution
of the country. As a staunch defender of free South Africa and of the right to
be a literary witness to the country’s tragedies, Gordimer, with great intellect,
skill and formal control, has explored the attenuation of morality in political
systems which distort human interaction.

*The House Gun* resists more strongly the imposition of paradigm
which resolves the relationship between the personal and the political. The
novels written after the dismantling of apartheid depict racist free South
Africa where, trust and mutual understanding binds each and everyone
together, reflects truthfully the changing scenario, the current conditions in
South Africa, as well as the frailty of human conditions in the midst of a
chaotic world. *The Pickup* deals with the familiar theme of the possibilities of personal redemption through immersion in the politically alien and culturally other. The author brings in the elements of history to analyze the lives of the characters relating them to the historical situations. Through Paul, Gordimer criticizes the damage done to human and ecological system. Accordingly *Get a Life* concerns itself with the global problem, the threat due to man’s scientific progress to the ecosystem.

Gordimer, a social realist is engaged in mirroring the oppressive and inequitable social order of the postcolonial Africa in “Bridging the Unbridgeable”. The stress and the strain weighing down the society in crisis becomes the pivot of her writing. The novels and short stories provide a haunting picture of the white domination and the ironies underlying the comfortable provincial white South African society, voicing the moral inability of an individual in the society that has consistently battered millions of its citizens. The vision of the novelist in picturing South Africa, free from fetters of colour and gender, is also revealed. She is anxious to know and witness the role of the Blacks and the Whites in the apartheid free South Africa. Hence, the novelist prophetically visualizes the future of South Africa with the Blacks and the Whites live in peace and harmony, prior to the annihilation of apartheid. A white writer, deeply devoted to Black Literature and its people, the writer presents an honest unprejudiced stance where the black and the white characters are presented equally without any artificiality.
Gordimer fictionalizes the real life events of the South African society which reflect the nuances of the country by delineating the experiences of the Blacks and the Whites. As an ardent fighter for apartheid, the novelist is very confrontational in portraying the segregated society under the official policy of racial discrimination that ably condemned the Blacks of their rights. The writer has exhibited the pain and strain, regression and repression, suppression and oppression, and confusion and the unfairness that exist in South Africa. The novelist, a White, finds her position in the land of the Blacks as unfavourable. Despite the banning of the novels, Gordimer revealed the uncomfortable ambiguities of the Blacks in their own land fighting for space and survival.

The novels further unfurl the inconsistency between the White conquerors and the conquered Black, white masters and black servants, the village and the city. The human discrepancy tattered between the wish to live private and the public life, the racial displacement and estrangement are exposed in them. The characters, governed by the South African feelings and the mental framework of the Whites never care for the hardships of others. Gordimer’s novels deal with the motifs of understanding, clemency, and adjustment record the vain efforts of the middle-class whites and the poor blacks to respect each other’s values. The artistic representation of the bond between the Whites and the Blacks announces the novelist’s inner longing to be together even in the frustrating situations.
The author’s vision of the cross-racial relationship among the Blacks and the Whites finds splendid expression in the understanding and misunderstanding between the Blacks and the Whites under contradictory situations. The troubled coupling of Rosa with Bassie/ Zwelinzima in *Burger’s Daughter*, Maureen and July in *July’s People* and Julie and Abdu in *The Pickup* manifests the yearning for a meaningful cross-racial connection. The characters such as Mehring, Maureen, Rosa, Julie, Jacobus, July, Bassie and Abdu are presented as representatives of the two divisions of the society. The white characters could not opt out and that they are helped by the black characters. Thus the author wishes for a life of co-existence between the Whites and the Blacks in South Africa.

The talent of the author to plunge into the relation between communal and personal life is presented in *The House Gun*. Gordimer examines the social twists of the apartheid through the microcosm of the family relationships in apartheid free South Africa. In *The Pickup*, the novelist logically portrays the inner pressure, pain, isolation, denunciation, love and life which mark the main characteristic features. *The Pickup* and *Get a Life* portray the unbridgeable gap between the Blacks and the Whites. The system of apartheid has established long or wide gap between the Blacks and the Whites that they could not overcome it even after the abolishment of apartheid.
The novels bring to light the dilemma of the Blacks in their dreadful living conditions, denial of basic human rights, the atrocities imposed upon them and the irretrievable pain. The novelist cautiously presents the predicaments of the Blacks which make them feel dislocated and an alien in South Africa. Apartheid created a heinous system of mistreatment in which racist minority monopolize economic wealth, while the vast majority of the oppressed, the Blacks are damned to poverty. The novelist dexterously weaves in the novels, the wealthy country South Africa with the Whites as the creamy layer and the Blacks as the dreamy layer. The novels picture the black labourers living a life of oscillation, where their dreams never become true. The novels reveal the pitiable condition of the Blacks who are ghettoized, viciously presented and brutally outlawed from all avenues of decency, hope, progress and livelihood. Gordimer portrays the excruciating pain and the traumatic experiences of the Blacks in South Africa. The dilemma of the voiceless people without permit pass is well depicted by the novelist in The Conservationist, Burger's Daughter, July’s People and The Pickup. Their life in the crowded reserves, and always at the beck and call of the Whites as a source of cheap labour brings to light the pathetic condition of the Blacks. The morbid aspects of apartheid such as violence, custodial death, murder, the police torture and township rioting characterized the South African reality. The insecurity of the Blacks in all walks of life is pictured in the novels.
Gordimer makes use of myths and fables to portray man’s life and illuminates the seamy side of life with a profusion of fantasy and absurdities. “Cultural Diversity”, a spectacular cultural tapestry of the novels is realistically outlined by Gordimer to express the culture of South Africa through the use of myths and rituals. Public follies, troubles and ambiguities of life and death pictured in the novels display the cultural traits of the country. The cultural clashes portrayed in the novels bring to light the realities of the South African society by presenting wide range of experiences budding from racial, ethnic, gender, sexual and class differences.

The picturisation of mythical heroes as models for behaviour, enhance the dedication and sacrifice of such heroes, who possess distinctiveness that are greatly valued in culture. The novelist illuminates Burger’s Daughter and July’s People with the presence of the mythical heroes. The significance of hero myth is well portrayed in the novels where the common South Africans could find their life vivacious due to the heroes. Creation myths which differ among African ethnic groups highlight similarities and differences in belief system and societal structures. The biblical verses of creation in The Bible illuminate the novels, bringing out the pressures of the protagonists, Paul Bannerman in Get a life and Mehring in The Conservationist. The story of Noah and flood from The Bible, is aptly connected to July’s act of bringing Maureen, Bam and their three children in the 'yellow Bakkie', the glorified ark
of Noah in July’s people. Through the myth, Gordimer unmasksthe real life situations and is genuine in depicting their cultural adaptation.

Fire and water are devised by Gordimer to build up the beliefs of the South Africans. The fire in the white man’s farm has purified the land from the witchcraft of White power. Water, a symbol of purification, purifies the farm by bringing the dead body out, and giving a ritualistic burial there by satisfying the ancient spirits. Gordimer has realistically presented flood and fire in The Conservationist, highlighting and enriching the cultural carpet of South Africa.

Gordimer epitomizes the significance of language in a society to know each other and live together for the synchronization and peace of the society and of an individual. The absolute absence of communication between the Blacks and the Whites form one of the characteristic features in the novels whereas the novelist portrays characters those who are willing to learn the African language. Thus, the novels bring out the significance of language for better communication and welfare of the South African society and its people.

Food, music and dance are strewn in the novels to paint the portrait of harmony in a pluralistic society. Food, as presented in the novels depicts the novelist’s observation of the diverse cultural traits of South Africa. The novelist pictures the habits of food of the South Africans in a forthright way.
Dance, as a prime means of artistic expression, together with music find
exceptional depiction in the novels. The writer sketches the importance of
music in their lives. Gordimer proudly presents the black South Africans,
suppressed and neglected by the Whites as artistic and imaginative in bringing
out the most beautiful creative craft works. The Zulu tradition and culture
shared in the novels present the way of the life of South Africans.

Rituals mentioned in the novels clearly exhibit the cultural splendour
of the society to which the author is dedicated. Religious beliefs and customs
are presented with an objective to present everyman’s culture. The rituals
beginning from the birth till death are exhibited to display the culture of
common South Africans candidly. The novelist’s exceptional exhibition of
Islamic rituals is still in practice among the Muslims. The ritualistic practices
are strictly followed by all Muslims and Gordimer pictures the living figures
who readily comply themselves with all ritualistic practices. The use of The
Bible and The Quran exemplify the author’s regard for religion. Through the
commandments of these scriptures, the novelist creates awareness in people of
the moral codes they have to follow in their lives. As Gordimer herself has
envisaged, the South African culture is a portrait of harmony in the pluralistic
society of the Whites and the Blacks.

Cultural adaptations in the novels reflect the harmonious living of the
Blacks and the Whites in future in South Africa. Gay Culture too finds aptly
sketched in the novels to display the reality of South African Culture. The
writer adroitly presents each minute persona of culture that makes the novels highly rich in the portrayal of the cultural canvas of South Africa. Culture of South Africa, well woven by the novelist, becomes a canvas for her excellent painting and she is the pioneer of writers who has brought out the nuances of culture through realistic portrayal.

Gordimer, who is interested in imposing the quality of social life has tried for social transformation through art. Through the characters the writer makes the readers and the society aware of the existing social evils and to rise in rage whenever they see such evils in life. Gordimer has probed deep into the most crucial human problems faced by the Whites and the Blacks and have artistically recorded them in the novels for the people to know of them and find ways and means of eradicating them. She is of the opinion that joy and freedom should be earned by the individual and not be begged. Unless men fight for their own rights and equip their mind with good insight, it is impossible for them to achieve dignity and self respect. The individual himself is responsible for the ultimate pain or the joy and that he should not accept compromise of any kind. For eradicating the evils suffered by the down-trodden, she suggests remedies from within; the protest should come from within. The urge should flame the sparks of freedom as it is their right to rightly live in the continent. The Blacks are not born low, they are to be acknowledged, recognized and respected. They should have the nerve to question the Whites. As a humanist writer, the novelist believes that dawn and
brightness in their lives is in their hands. Gordimer presages a new society founded on trust and true love. She exhorts the South African Whites that decades of oppression and repression have caused deep and bleeding wounds in the minds of the Blacks; only love and compassion for the fellow beings would heal and elevate their humanity. She affirms that only true love could put an end to all kinds of injustices and exploitation and help to build a modern society where race or colour is not the deciding criterion. The novelist makes them realize that their day is not too far. Thus Gordimer brings to radiance, the spirit, upheaval and awakening of the downtrodden.

The literary works of Gordimer could be further explored in terms of sociological, psychological, autobiographical, existential, feminist and eco-critical perspectives. They could be compared with those of Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison of Afro-American Literature; Doris Lessing, J.M. Coetzee, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka of African Literature and Bama, Mahasweta Devi, Sivakami and Perumal Murugan of Dalit Literature.

The novels of Gordimer are models or statutory books of perception, which anyone at any era could follow. All her works are forays of different problems and predicaments faced by the Blacks and the Whites in the changing political scenario of South Africa. The life and experience in South Africa had given the novelist, a clear vision as an outsider and insider to portray the suffering, the cultural diversity and the encounter between the private and the public. The predicaments of the Blacks are the predicaments of
anyone who occupies the edge in the society. All her writings radiate immense compassion for human beings. A rare writer with acute perception and love for the country, she feels that the edges have to move towards the centre. The novelist makes the marginalized assume optimistically that the future world would be better for them, bereft of division, economic status and without racial prejudice. Thus, Gordimer through the novels creates awareness in the society by revealing the horrors of racial discrimination, cultural diversity, the encounter between the private and the public thereby bridging the unbridgeable.