SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY
IN THE SHORT STORIES OF NADINE GORDIMER

Abstract

The doctoral dissertation "SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY IN THE SHORT STORIES OF NADINE GORDIMER" attempts to define the author's stance, both as a writer and as a South African, in terms of opposition to 'apartheid and the ideological disruption it consummated in the society.' It is a textual analysis of the short stories, to trace the political ideology embedded in them and to outline the social consciousness. Her narratives mediate for a collective conscience that would bring about a change in the society. Gordimer constantly confronts the connection of commitment and art, in her writings and has effectively reconciled the two vital aspects of her being, in her literary career.

The introductory chapter acts more or less as a preface and gives an overview of the scope of the topic of discussion. The term ideology is a problematic concept; yet it is used in this dissertation in its simple definition. Ideology is seen as a system of thought which has the ability to gather momentum and legitimacy for any particular political faction.
The second chapter "IDEOLOGY IN NADINE GORDIMER’S POLITICAL SUBJECTS" attempts to trace the ideological statements that emerge from the subtext of Gordimer’s narratives. It evaluates the political coloring of her ‘subjects’ or characters; scrutinizes the political reasons in the choice of her situations and appraises the personal drama in her fiction that reconstructs the political history of the land.

Gordimer’s political ideology is studied as "the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination" (Studies in the Theory of Ideology, 4). Within her text, ideology valorizes in her depiction of the social reality. The transactions across the color bar, are analyzed with microscopic details, in several everyday situations. And the subtext evolves into an in-depth study of the colonial constructs and its psychological impairments on the society at large. In the kaleidoscope of varying skin colors, Gordimer unravels a ‘social reality,’ which suggests ‘what is seen’ as opposed to ‘what is.’ Black and white voices are manipulated with increased sophistication by an authorial consciousness, which can be read as the ideology in the text. Ideology and its infiltration into the social vision, is studied as the twin faces of the same figment. Gordimer in her role as a ‘cultural worker’ presents, situation and characters so as to bring out the
interplay of varied forces of power/authority in the class-ridden society. They are the simple snap-shots of selective occurrences, that may have an ideological reason or implication, even if no moral remedy is suggested. The evil is identified across the borders of law and lawlessness, judged only by the weightage of conscience-guidelines of universal human values of compassion and fair-play. And the inter-racial dialogues are systematically analysed in varying contexts: man/woman, slave/master, liberalist/radical, and the inherent distrust and element of fear is focalized. The character of ‘fear,’ has been examined minutely and the variations are illuminated. From story to story they modulate from mere physical/biological level to that of an intensely problematic racial unconscious. The psychological regressions experienced by both the natives and the Whites in a colonial environment is analysed as the root-cause of all these social evils. The entire writings of Gordimer could be explained as her aspiration to understand and decipher the impact of European culture on the society of South Africa. And to undo its effects Gordimer tries to reinstate honor into the historic past of the tribal ways of the Negro community. Along with her contemporary intellectuals, Gordimer participates in the re-construction of a honorable and civilized past for the blacks, prior to the advent of the missionaries.
The third chapter directly involves with the social realism in Gordimer’s stories and its vital role in re-structuring the value-system in the text. The various goals and reasons in arbitrating such a comprehensive picture of South African society, in Gordimer’s fiction is analyzed. In re-creating the social history of her people Gordimer tries to obtain legitimacy for the black cause. The power structure within the various strata of society is dramatized in her several stories. The hierarchy of power between the blacks and the East European immigrants, juxtaposed against the transactions between the East European immigrants and the whites, spells out, a new meaning to the inter-racial dialogue in the society of South Africa. Gordimer explores a whole range of ‘bad’ and ‘good’ Whites and Blacks in her stories. The variety poses a comprehensive picture of the ‘reality’ beneath the superfluous.

Gordimer builds a structure of social hierarchy, by carefully chosen ‘subjects’ and explores the political implications in their personal situations. The power relations are explored in several of Gordimer’s short stories, to analyze the political and ideological element embedded in the narrative. The relationships are categorically investigated -- between the black man and the white woman; or the black slave and the white master; or the black rebel and the white liberal. Gordimer twists
further to visualize the intricacies of the dialogue between a white rebel and a black woman; or a black woman and a white lover. In Gordimer’s writings one finds endless opportunities to re-create a south African world with all its colors and corruption. Gordimer projects the entire picture of the society and she includes the Indian, Jewish and East European elements in the society. She advocates a collective culture that includes all the variant historic impacts to be accepted into the mainstream of cultural identity of that particular place.

The next chapter, "DECONSTRUCTION OF THE COLONIAL MYTH" contemplates Gordimer’s writings in a post-colonial perspective. In the political context of the society the most determining factor remains the colonial impact. Hence while analyzing the social reality, Gordimer deconstructs and rewrites several of the colonial myths. The post-colonial tendencies in her writings are elaborated in the third chapter. Colonialism is studied as a problematic of the colonizer as much as the colonized. Gordimer recognizes the plurality of contacts between the colonizer and the colonized, and endeavors towards a collective culture for the nation, which is free from both the white guilt and the sins of the European forefathers. She awakens the white consciousness that had not come to terms with the black reality. The machinery of de-colonization takes on a
white character, and it becomes as much a problem of the white race as that of the black race.

Gordimer in her narrative re-inscribes the social codes and elucidates the false consciousness in the white community. Thus she provides a guilty conscience within the white consciousness and advocates a social and political change in the society. Her resistance literature, effectively obtains a legitimacy for the non-hegemonic [black] power bloc. Gordimer has depicted the devious racial 'theories' [such as 'samba slave,' 'civilizing the pagans'] that gave legitimacy to the political domination and economic exploitation of the natives. And she has deconstructed these, with an authentic presentation of the reality beneath. The colonial impact is portrayed as a destructive influence on the Black consciousness and this chapter, also deals with the psychological and economic devastation brought about by the colonial rule. And educating the Whites, becomes part of Gordimer's political program of 'de-colonization.'

The fifth chapter deals with the narrative techniques employed by the author for the creation of a suitable tone and atmosphere for her social vision. In depicting the random images of a cross-section of the society, short story as a literary genre, provides the
ideal media. Gordimer is a very natural artist who makes use of various structures in her stories to air her message. "Narrative voices" in Gordimer's text to a large extend serve as principle to express political ideology. By bestowing authority to certain voices, and incorporating signs of unreliability in some other "voices," Gordimer arbitrates the fictional truth of her stories. Without taking sides with any particular political ideology, she maneuvers, the text in such a way as to present different prospective attitudes to the same issue. For this she, engages several 'voices' in the narrative, struggling for dominance within the discourse. The carnival of 'voices' in her text, evokes the authentic picture of a struggling nation bewildered and at cross-roads of a political and cultural revolution. The narrative shift that twists the flow of 'meaning' and provides a whole new dimension to the theme is also, scrutinized in the chapter on "NARRATIVE VOICE IN THE TEXT."

Gordimer, had ample use for irony in her writings, due to the inherent irony in the society. She tries not to trample with the truth with the power of her authorial manipulation. She strains to create a 'real life South Africa; in her works, with all its irony, distrust and moral degradation. The study explores and elucidates the various forms of irony that Gordimer has employed in her
text: verbal irony, situational irony, circumstantial irony and ironic impersonations. It has also graphed the evolution of her narrative techniques with the passage of years and the political development of her country. Selecting poignant moments in history, Gordimer has eternalized the "readers apprehension," rather than preaching "moral improvement," in her narratives (EG, 107). The fragmentary nature of life in South Africa, finds an appropriate expression in the short fictions. 'Nothing really happens,' in the stories of Gordimer, but the structural 'silences' and 'gaps' are as eloquent as the words, when the subtext emerges with the true meaning of the text.

The survey analyzes the methodology by which Gordimer transports her political ideology of dismantling the colonial edifice, into the text and thus reinstates honor into the black consciousness. This she has achieved through the classic portrayal of the social reality of South Africa in such a compelling way that it would revolt itself. Further she projects the latent neocolonial tendencies in the economic relations with the western power bloc. It is awe inspiring to watch an 'all comprehensive picture of South Africa' evolves in Gordimer's works are taken in their entirety. As if in a jigsaw puzzle, each individual story adds to the corpus of 'meaning.' The final picture is unbearably cruel and
fascist in its political climate that the Whites are forced to re-function their attitudes. As for the Blacks, Gordimer has exposed the innate servitude that has penetrated their racial unconscious, which lures them into internalizing the 'master's culture.' This awareness of the racial suppression at a personal and collective level, advocates a radical restructuring of the Black identity. In the resulting winds of change, Gordimer visualizes a 'de-colonizing of the African mind.'

And her search for identity and 'placing' in the land of her birth, can be traced in various political and ideological voices in her narratives. Once the social reality is deconstructed, there arises the question of the shape and structure of the 'new' South Africa. Gordimer envisages a future for her nation based on 'cultural syncretism.' In this 'multicultural theory' the inter-racial dialogues shall be on a plane of acceptance of difference on equal terms. Gordimer seems to endorse the instrumentality of culture in the national liberation struggle. The whole range of Gordimer's writings, are 'snapshots' of South African society. But the pictures -- the reality they represent -- are her version or her interpretation of them. Hence it could be argued that Gordimer's social realism is her political ideology.
Nadine Gordimer, observes the social codes that determine the Black/White dichotomy, in her writings. The racial patterns secluded beneath the political struggle of her nation, allows her to re-inscribe, 'the great South African lie' within the scope of her fiction. Being a 'marginal' element in the society, her observations had the accuracy and clarity that was unattainable by those directly involved in the political struggle. This limpidity enabled her to visualize a 'cultural identity' for the post-independent South Africa, that was neither a pure resistance to colonialism nor a hegemonic idea of national purity. Gordimer proposes a syncretic identity made up of all cultures and races which have taken part in the history of her nation. Finally through the exploration of the polyphonic dialogues within the multicolored society of South African kaleidoscope, she attempts to reach an understanding of her own identity -- as a white woman and a revolutionary writer.