Apartheid and Nadine Gordimer: An Introduction

Apartheid, which in Afrikaans means 'apartness', designates a policy of racial segregation practiced by the National Party, which came to power in South Africa in 1948. However, although this policy of segregation became a state policy only in 1948, the history of racial domination and oppression dates back to the mid-seventeenth century when the Dutch East India Company set up a provisioning station in the Cape. Donald Woods in his book, *Apartheid: A Graphic Guide*, states that white settlers from the Netherlands arrived in South Africa in the mid-seventeenth century, forcing the occupants of South Africa out of their land or using them as labourers. The "Scramble for Africa" then came in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries where the French, British, Portuguese, Germans, Belgians, Spanish, and Dutch colonized and took control of almost all of the fifty states which make up the African nation (Woods 15).

By the twentieth century, the British controlled most of northeast, east, west, center, and South Africa, and the French controlled most of northwest Africa. Southern Africa was separated into four territories in the end of the nineteenth century, two of which were under British rule and the other two in the hands of the Afrikaners. The black people did not have any political rights in these four territories and segregation was already in full force at this point. The Dutch descendants, also known as the Boers or Afrikaners, revolted against the British in the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902, trying to claim the two other colonies. After much conflict, in 1910, the Afrikaner community (the descendants of Dutch traders, live stock farmers and religious refugees from west Europe) and the British established a nations-state called the Union of South Africa. The National Party
was formed by the Afrikaners and the British formed the South African Party. Power was shared until 1948 when the National Party won the general election. The Afrikaners immediately established the policy known as Apartheid. Every population group considered non-European by the government was governed separately and subordinated at every level to white South Africa. This meant that there was separation between all African communities including the whites and non-whites; Africans and other non-whites; all African ethnic groups; and rural Africans and urban Africans. Most of these people were restricted to rural reservations called homelands where life was very difficult. The few who worked outside the reservations were usually young single men. They received low wages and lived in segregated rural settlements tightly controlled by whites. Some of the discriminatory bills passed in the attempt to promote this policy were the following:

- The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, 1949, and Immorality Act, 1950, constituted the government’s first step in institutionalizing racial differentiation. These acts prohibited sexual intercourse and marriage between Whites and Blacks. All people over the age of sixteen were required to carry identity cards that grouped the people into various racial categories.

- The Groups Areas Act, 1950, restricted the entrance of Blacks into the urban, industrial, and agricultural areas, reserving these areas only for the Whites. Most people who were allowed to be within the reserved areas were workers, housemaids or gardeners, who were given state permission. Spouses and other family members were also restricted from living with those who were granted
permission. If Blacks were caught with family members who did not have the permission to be in the area, they were arrested and imprisoned, once spotted by the inspectors.

- **The Population Registration Act**, also in 1950, required that all Africans were classified into three categories according to race. These were Black, Colored, or White, and the government made these classifications according to a person's habits, education, appearance, and manner. Rules were given according to race and had to be followed to prevent dire consequences.

- **The Bantu Authorities Act**, 1951, assigned all Africans to their native land. This stole power away from the Africans, and instead allowed them to vote solely within their homeland. This allowed the denationalization of Africans possible.

- **The Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act**, 1952, required all Africans to carry a passbook, similar to a passport. The pass-book contained all personal information, such as name, photograph of holder, fingerprints, and also gave a detailed explanation on where a person could be employed, and their performance at work. If Africans did not obey the rules, they were kicked out.
gave a detailed explanation on where a person could be employed, and their performance at work. If Africans did not obey the rules, they were kicked out from the area, and their crime would be reported in their pass-books. The penalty for not carrying the book at all times was also severe, ranging from imprisonment and fines, to a torturous death.

Eventually the oppressed grew restless and strikes, boycotts and demonstrations became prominent. The African National Congress (ANC) was one of the groups protesting apartheid. Their goal was to establish a nonracial alliance, end apartheid and create a nonracial democracy. However, this was difficult because there was not much unity among the non-European communities, as these groups had been kept apart for so long. There was also not much support from the black-community actions groups in the urban and rural areas. Because of these factors, in the early 1960’s, the apartheid regime held off its opposition. However, within a decade, the resistance movement returned. Steven Biko led the South African Students Organization (SASO) to form the Black People’s Convention in 1972. This group launched the Black Consciousness movement. Then in 1976, a revolt by students in Soweto against an offensive educational system spread throughout the country. The arrest and killing of Biko in police custody created a fresh outburst of public anger. In 1977, organizations associated with the Black Consciousness Movement were banned and many of its leaders were put into jail or forced into exile. The 1980’s were a difficult time in South Africa. An international campaign was started to prevent non-South African companies from investing in the country including an attempt to ban any exports from South Africa. The way of life was affected greatly by this and strikes, work stoppages and
boycotts became the order of the day. Hundreds of thousands of impoverished people ignored the laws and flooded into the cities in search of work, food and shelter. Nelson Mandela, who was involved with the ANC since the Second World War, had been sentenced for life in prison for sabotage. After 27 years as a political prisoner, he was released by President F.W. de Klerk. In the early 1990's, Mandela led the multi-party negotiations that finally brought an end to apartheid. He also became the first democratically elected president of South Africa. In 1990, President de Klerk finally announced the end of apartheid, and by 1991, all apartheid laws were repealed.

Nadine Gordimer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991, has established herself in the international literary world as South Africa's leading voice depicting the realities of life under apartheid. Her writing runs parallel with the era of apartheid in South Africa, an era in which the racist organization of South Africa was systematically intensified through legislation and brutal state control following the election to power of the Nationalist Government in 1948. In a seminar paper on Africa at Washington D.C., in 1959, entitled "1959: What is Apartheid", and included in her collection of essays in Living in Hope and History. Notes From Our Century, Nadine Gordimer examines at length the whole question of apartheid. The nature of apartheid, to her, changes depending on who was looking at the issue. To quote her, she says:

_If you ask a member of the South African government, he will tell you that it is separate and parallel development of white and black. If you ask an ordinary white man who supports the policy, he will tell you that it is the means of keeping South Africa white. If you ask a black man .... well, he may give you_
any of a dozen answers arising out of whatever aspect of apartheid he has been
brought up short against that day, for to him it is neither an ideological concept
nor a policy, but a context in which his whole life, learning, working, loving is
rigidly enclosed. (Gordimer, 105)

If one were to know, according to her, how Africans, black men and women, live in
South Africa, one would observe an exposition of apartheid in action. This is so
because, for in all of a black man’s life, rejection by the white man has the last word.
With this word of rejection apartheid began, long before it hardened into laws and
legislation, long before it became a theory of racial selectiveness and the policy of a
government. To quote her:

Shall I forget that when I was a child I was taught that I must never use a cup
from which our servant had drunk? (Gordimer, 106)

Nadine Gordimer was born on November 20, 1923, in a small gold-mining town of
Springs, thirty miles east of Johannesburg, into a family that bore the wounds of its
immigrant status. Like the majority of Jewish people in South Africa, her father, Isidore
Gordimer, came from Lithuania. He was poor, uneducated, and unable to speak a word
of English. He struggled to make his living as a watchmaker and by the time he married
he owned a small jeweler’s shop. Nadine’s mother, Nan Meyers, was a socially
ambitious Anglo-Jewish woman whose aspirations to join the gentile bourgeoisie was
hampered by her husband’s passivity and foreign difference. Nadine grew up in the
1930s in a home environment devoid of political consciousness when segregation and
racism were strong, though before the formal institution of apartheid in 1948. In an
interview, which forms part of the collection Conversations with Nadine Gordimer,
edited by Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, she claims that her father's attitude towards blacks was simply that “they were beyond the human pole”, his struggles in life producing “merely the desire to get what you can and just hang on to a cozy life”. (248) Her mother, the dominant partner in an unhappy marriage, “did good work . . . . she was always uneasy and angry if she saw black people being treated badly, but it was always as a form of charity. She didn’t connect it with the law . . . with the fact that they didn’t have rights as white people had”. (307)

It was in this atmosphere that Gordimer was nurtured. Her childhood passion was dancing, though as early as when she was nine she evinced an interest in writing. When she was ten, however, a family doctor diagnosed a rapid heartbeat and her protective mother stopped her dancing. A year later, her mother withdrew Gordimer from the private convent school she attended and engaged a tutor. The result was intense loneliness and she turned inward and became a vociferous reader. The local whites-only library became her lifeline. She nurtured her imagination on a variety of texts, from Pepy's Diary and The Anatomy of Melancholy to War and Peace and Gone With the Wind. It was thanks to her one year at Johannesburg’s University of the Witwatersrand when she was twenty-one, and to her friendships through the early 1950s with black and white activists, artists, musicians, and writers that her political consciousness was truly aroused. She lacked the politicized background of some of the young people from the liberal families she met in Johannesburg, but through the multi-racial friendships forged with blacks from the racially mixed and vibrant Sophiatown ghetto crowd and through mutual interests in art and literature, she awakened to the “shameful enormity of the colour bar”. As she put it in The Essential Gesture:
Writing, Politics and Places, it was not the “problems” of her country that set her to writing; rather, it was learning to write that sent her “falling, falling through the surface of the South African way of life”. (26)

In 1949, Gordimer married Dr. Gerald Gavron, the year her first volume, Face to Face: Short Stories, was published. A few years later, she republished many of these in a second volume, The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories. Her first published novel, The Lying Days (1953) appeared after her divorce from Gavron. In 1954, she married Reinhold Cassirer, an art dealer from Heidelberg, Germany. Their son, Hugo, was born the next year. The Lying Days was followed by A World of Strangers (1958) and Occasion for Loving (1963). These early novels capture her scrutiny of white South African society through an essentially liberal lens. In The Lying Days, narrator/protagonist Helen Shaw tells of her cloying childhood in the white mining community of Atherton, where a strict patriarchal social hierarchy matched one’s position on the mine to the street and size of one’s house. Helen’s potential growth is measured by the extent to which her curiosity and intelligence lead her to break away from the stifling conformity of home. The story follows chronologically her white middle-class upbringing in the mining community, whose racial fear and prejudice blinds her to social injustices. It follows her self-absorbed and politically oblivious first love and sexual awakening, as well as her struggle for independence and adulthood as she wrestles with an emerging social awareness and its consequent alienation and guilt. A World of Strangers, like The Lying Days, seeks through the principled engagement of its white characters in South Africa to justify their presence in Africa. But here, instead of a young, white South African woman narrating
the interior journey of her growth, Gordimer uses an outsider, an Englishman, Toby Hood, newly arrived in South Africa as literary agent for his family’s publishing company, to relate his adventures in the split world of the black ghettos and the leisured, high-living, white suburban set. Occasion for Loving continues where A World of Strangers left off. Jessie and Tom Stilwell are dedicated, white, South African liberals. They are attempting to live decent, socially connected lives despite the legal strictures of apartheid. A history professor, Tom Stilwell is writing a book on the “African subcontinent that would present the Africans as peoples invaded by the white west, rather than as another kind of fauna dealt with by the white man in his exploration of the world”. (Occasion for Loving, 14). Through his university connections, Tom invites ethno-musicologist Boaz Davis and his wife Ann, (an English couple originally from South Africa and Rhodesia, respectively) to stay in their suburban Johannesburg home while Boaz studies African instruments. Jessie, though apprehensive, relents and the Davises move in. Boaz spends most of his time in the field and Ann creates a job for herself displaying African art at native schools. At one of these schools, Ann meets Gideon Shibals. Gideon is an embittered, and extremely talented, black painter who had once received a scholarship to study in Rome, but was forced to refuse it since the government would not have let him return. Ann and Gideon fall in love and have an affair, the illegal nature of which forms the core theme of the book.

In her middle period, Gordimer wrote her most enduring novels: The Late Bourgeois World (1966), A Guest of Honour (1970), The Conservationist (1974), Burger’s Daughter (1979), and July’s People (1981). She strengthened her narrative strategy, and her political consciousness embraced the need for radical commitment and
The Late Bourgeois World is more explicitly intertwined with the actual political events of its time than any of its predecessors. Taking this world as her subject matter, Gordimer faces the challenge of finding a narrative strategy that could transmit the shock, and cynicism that had overwhelmed the small group of white dissenters who found themselves alone on the margins of both black and white society. She used the ironic juxtaposition of two relationships experienced by her narrator and protagonist, Liz Van Den Sandt—her past with ex-husband, Max, and her present with lawyer lover, Graham Mill—to examine the revolutionary crisis of the early 1960s and assess its implications for future action. The novel opens one sunny Saturday morning at breakfast at home with Graham when Liz receives a telegram informing her that Max has committed suicide. The occasion of his suicide becomes the centre from which the novel explores the deepening ironies that liberal whites were facing in their need to find a way to resist apartheid’s tightening grip. Though the story of the novel is confined to a time period of twenty four hours, the female narrator’s consciousness carries us through her perceptions of the historical and personal past, to awaken, at the end of the novel, to possibilities of resistance in the current.

A Guest of Honour, which won Gordimer the prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize, tells the story of an unspecified, newly independent African nation’s troubled genesis as seen through the eyes of a former colonial official, Evelyn James Bray, who was expelled by the colonial government for his sympathies toward African independence. Bray returns to Africa as a guest of honour for the independence celebrations of the country he helped to free. But instead of returning home he succumbs under the pressure from his long-time political confidante and friend, the new
President Adamson Mweta, to the temptation of accepting the newly created post of special education advisor in the northern district of Gala, where he and his wife had been previously stationed. In Gala, Bray begins an unanticipated but passionate and intense affair with Rebecca Edwards, a mother of four whose husband is in the Congo somewhere. Bray’s daily encounters, his visits with friends, and his relationship with Rebecca unravel the complexities, contradictions and the absurdities that interlace the political and private worlds. The Conservationist, Gordimer’s sixth novel, resonates with the literary history of white South Africa. Mehring, the central character of the novel, is drawn from the wealthy industrial sect. He is English-speaking but has an Afrikaans surname, and owns a four hundred acre farm outside Johannesburg. He initially saw it as good place to bring women, but now he seeks respite there from the world of stocks and shares. Though owner of the farm, he is not a farmer. He uses his farming activities as a sentimental site of connection to the African earth. This relationship to the land is the main focus of the novel. Mehring’s cynical and self-interested need to both exploit and conserve the land drives him to a state of frenzied collapse. The discovery, early in the novel, of an anonymous, murdered black body in the third pasture of his farm compounds the accumulation of guilt and alienation. After a crude burial by the police too lazy to remove the body, Mehring remains haunted by its presence on his farm. Near the end of the novel, a freak cyclonic storm grotesquely raises the body out of the mud to create a nightmare vision that shatters Mehring’s last tenuous grip on reality. He flees from the farm in a delusory state. The body on the farm is claimed in brotherhood and harmony by the black workers on the farm. They give it
an appropriate ceremonial burial, symbolically reclaiming the earth, or Africa, for the Africans.

*Burger's Daughter* centres on a subject that had fascinated Gordimer for a long time, the role of the small group of white hardcore leftists, which she explores through the family of a dedicated long-term communist dissident, Lionel Burger. But we never meet him. The story is that of his daughter, Rosa, brought up under her father's spell, waiting outside prisons and living among dedicated Communists, yet trying to escape, alone, after her father's death, from a commitment that is all-enveloping. Gordimer's eight novel, *July's People*, takes as its topic the apocalyptic event of a fractured nation in open and total revolution. It tells the story of Maureen and Bam Salesman their family, who escape the burning, war-torn city for the rural African village of their domestic servant, July. At July's suggestion, Maureen and the three children are led by July to his family home, the home where he has spent his holiday from his job in the city each year. They find themselves accommodated in a hut, stripped of all but a handful of things from their suburban life in Johannesburg. In a reversal of roles, the Smales try at least to be good guests, but find that neither they nor July can escape the roles they have inhabited for so long. Without the power that their economic and material status conferred on them, the Smales' identities crumble and they soon become bitter strangers to one another. They cling pathetically to the symbols of power from their previous lives — the car, the radio, the gun — each steadily usurped or lost to the African community. Bam, a mere shadow of the white master without his props, helps a bit around the village and takes care of the children. Maureen, prevented from helping the village women by July, is forced to reassess her past. The Smales children, on the
other hand, make friends with the African children and quickly adapt to their new way of life, absorbing African customs and courtesies unconsciously. They represent the hope for the future. But it is the relationship between Maureen and July that dominates, spiraling out of control until they are locked in intimate psychological battle. At the end of the novel, when Maureen hears the throb of a helicopter engine as it lands in the veld beyond, she runs toward it, not knowing or caring which army will be at the controls.

After July's People, the novels A Sport of Nature (1987) and My Son's Story (1990) became increasingly ideologically prescriptive. The impending change in power in the late 1980s focused her attention on the creation of a new nation and its future. A Sport of Nature is the most historically and geographically panoramic of Gordimer's work. A female bildungsroman, it follows the adventures and coming of age of Hillela Capran, who has been deserted at age four by her mother for a Portuguese lover. After being expelled from her Rhodesian boarding school for befriending a “coloured” youth, Hillela is again abandoned, this time by her ineffectual father, to the care of her upper-middle-class Jewish aunts in Johannesburg. When caught sleeping with her cousin, Sasha, she is ousted from the sanctuary of her liberal aunt's home, and she moves through a series of adventures, sexual and otherwise. She works at a number of odd jobs and explores various relationships, one of which leads her to flee with a phony white activist into independent Tanzania. When he, too, abandons her, she is “rescued” by South African revolutionaries working in exile, a fate that propels her eventually into marriage and motherhood with a black South African revolutionary organizer, Whaila Kgomani. After her perfect “rainbow” marriage is shattered by his brutal assassination, Hillela learns the need for commitment to the liberation cause for which she now works
untiringly. As a result of her work, she meets and almost marries a white American, Brad, whom she passes up finally for marriage to a black African general – soon to be successful president – of an unidentified independent African country. The general ultimately becomes president of the Organization for African Unity (OAU), and he and Hillela preside happily over the independence ceremonies celebrating the new nation of South Africa. Gordimer’s tenth novel, My Son’s Story, represents a substantive shift in focus. While A Sport of Nature centred on race, this novel wrestles with issues of gender in the building of a new nation. The novel is set in the early 1980s, when petty apartheid laws are being dismantled and South Africa faces international sanctions designed to strangle the economy and so force political change in the country. It tells the tale of a respectable Coloured schoolmaster who is drawn out of his comfortable though poor bourgeois family existence through his principled identification with the increasing militancy of his students. Sonny, the school-master, turns out to be a surprisingly good speaker, and he is recruited into, and then rises through, the ranks of the banned African National Congress (ANC) until he loses his government teaching job and is detained in jail for two years. His refined and lovely wife Aila, his bright son Will, and his lively, pert daughter Baby have been protected from political implication through Sonny’s adherence to the rules of silence in the movement. In prison Hannah, a fleshy, blonde activist for an international human rights agency, who becomes his focus first for friendship, and later, upon release, for a joyous but increasingly obsessive love affair, visits Sonny. Will discovers the affair unwittingly on day when he stumbles upon his father and Hannah at the theatre, and he becomes an unwilling accomplice in order to protect his mother. The affair continues, a destructive force at the center of the family
as they all eventually intuit what is going on. Baby parties, takes drugs, attempts suicide, and leaves home; Will feels anguished and trapped. Only Aila seems to maintain her quiet, good, homebody wifely composure. Alienated from Sonny, Aila becomes a confidante for her daughter, who eventually announces her clandestine involvement in the struggle, which requires her exile to Zambia with her activist boyfriend. Aila’s consequent trips to Zambia to visit Baby, who soon has a child, leads to her own unexpected involvement in the movement, an involvement revealed only late in the novel, much to the astonishment of Sonny and Will as well as the reader, through her arrest. Sonny’s status within the movement has by this time declined, and Hannah is moving on to a job promotion in another country. After a display of confidence and competence worthy of any comrade during her political trial, Aila leaves Sonny and Will confused and alone when she skips bail to live in exile. She is permanently lost to them both.

Gordimer’s 1994 novel, *None to Accompany Me*, straddles the transition to the new future. Though not quite a post-apartheid novel, it was written and is set during the time of major political and social transition after Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in February 1990 and before elections in May 1994. It steps back from prophecy and prescription to reflect on the process by which the private and political past has finally brought the long-awaited future to the present. The central drama of the novel takes place within the internal life of Vera Stark, who journeys through her past to arrive, like the country, at an independence, alone, and free to continue the political work that has become her life’s commitment. In 1998, Gordimer published her first truly post-apartheid novel, *The House Gun*. It is the first real test of her artistic endurance beyond
her political engagement with the apartheid era. The novel embraces the inevitable mingling of cultures that begins to take place in a society now founded on principles of equality and dignity.

A close study of Nadine Gordimer’s body of works, especially her fiction written during the apartheid era lends itself to certain easily discernible features. Through their acute and sustained observation of the society she inhabits, her novels give us an extraordinary and unique insight into historical experience in the period in which she has been writing. An important corollary to her observation of South African society is that the perspective she employs in her fiction is also social and historical in nature. The key to this perspective is that social and private life is seen as integrally related and her fiction demonstrates how the private can be a site for resistance and transgression. This aspect of her fiction is illustrated through her analysis of political issues through her own brand of micropolitics or the politics of the body, in which questions of sexual expression and transgression are closely linked to racial consciousness. Her novels display how the politics of sex and power in South Africa are inextricably intertwined. But if apartheid was about the body, it was also about space—and Gordimer’s fiction reveals her ongoing, and developing understanding of its importance in the South African context. In consonance with these features of her fictional output, the present study attempts to analyze the features of her work that makes her such a powerful voice of the South African society against the repressive policies of the Apartheid regime.
The present study has been divided into the following chapters:

Chapter I: Apartheid and Nadine Gordimer: An Introduction

This chapter examines the ideology of Apartheid and traces the fictional career of Nadine Gordimer in the apartheid era.

Chapter II: ‘History from the Inside’.

This chapter analyses the historical and political significance of Gordimer’s fictional output as a shifting and developing response to events in modern South Africa. It also depicts Gordimer’s implicit understanding of the relativity and mutability of her own historical consciousness.

Chapter III: Quest for Identity: National and Literary.

This chapter examines the issue of Gordimer’s identity, the implications it has for her as a writer.

Chapter IV: Interplay Between Public and Private Worlds.

This chapter examines how in her fiction, Gordimer’s emphasizes the indivisibility between the public and private lives of individuals in the South African context under apartheid.

Chapter V: Racism and Sexism: Micropolitics or Politics of the Body.

In this chapter the emphasis is to highlight how in her fiction, Gordimer pursues her political analysis through the politics of the body where questions of sexual expression and transgression are closely linked to racial consciousness.