



Loss of Identity in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's daughter*

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Abstract— *Loss of identity is a stark reality in postcolonial South Africa and it has found expression in artistic works. The fictionalisation of feelings of not belonging or a sense of unhomeliness is illuminated in this paper. This paper is a literary exploration of loss of identity in Nadine Gordimer's Burger's daughter and it employ Erikson's theory of human development as a tool to examine, discuss and explore how the concept works in Rosa Burger's life. The concept is exacerbated by racism, apartheid and cultural and linguistic identity. Loss of identity thrives in a racially segregated environment and where there is abuse of power. Rosa runs up against the boundaries of a white male hegemony, underscoring her inability to find any space outside the ideology that defines her. It focuses on the ways in which Rosa negotiates subjectivity where she internalizes the law of the father and when she rejects her imposed identity.*

Keywords— *Cultural and Linguistic identity, Erikson's theory, Loss of identity, Postcolonial, Subjectivity.*

In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity. (Erikson 28)

Identity is a multidimensional word. In psychology and sociology, identity is a person's conception and expression of their individuality. However the formation of one's identity occurs through one's identifications with significant others (primarily with parents and other individuals during one's biographical experiences, and also with 'groups' as they are perceived). Theorist Erik Erikson coined the term identity crisis and believed that it was one of the most important conflicts people face in development. According to Erikson, an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. Erikson described identity as

A subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of oneself – conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly

given- that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals- with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made and first sexual encounters(58)

Nadine Gordimer an unmatched literary giant whose life and works are an unending quest for humanity. When Nadine Gordimer gives us a novel that opens society's beating heart to our gaze, it is an event of unusual importance. It is hard to know whether *Burger's Daughter* will have greater impact as a depiction of South Africa today, more revealing than a thousand new dispatches or as the moving story of the unforgettable Rosa Burger. She is a young woman cast in the mould of a revolutionary tradition, trying to uphold a heritage handed on by martyred parents and still carve out of a sense of self.

Burger's daughter stands as Gordimer's response to a painful challenge to her political relevance and imaginative authority in South Africa. In this work Gordimer focuses upon the fantasies of the white subconscious in order to undermine their power. In it the

fifth stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, identity v/s role confusion can be associated with that of Rosa's identity crisis. In the opening scene of the novel Rosa is presented as she appears to other observers as seen by casual passers-by as reported on by her headmistress, and as transformed by the rhetoric of the Left, which converts her into "Little Rosa Burger", "an example to us all" (Gordimer 12). Rosa reflects her invisibility as a person: "When they saw me outside the prison, what did they see? I shall never know. I saw-see-that profile in a hand-held mirror directed towards another mirror" (13-14). As the daughter of a Communist hero it is assumed by other that Rosa's view reflects her father's. Rosa is thus trapped in a hall of mirrors an object in the eyes of others whose internal reality remains unknown. She is placed by the observers only in relation to their own political position: an image of the struggle in the "bland heroics of badly, written memoirs by the faithful" (14) a suspicious object under state surveillance.

Rosa Burger begins her tale with the recognition that,

One is never talking to one self, always one is addressed to someone. Suddenly, without knowing the reason, at different stages in one's life, one is addressing this person or that all the time, even dreams are performed before an audience. (16)

After her militant parents death Rosa faced an uncertainty throughout her life. She thinks, was it her duty and destiny to take up the torch and to submit to party disciplines like that of her beloved parents. For Rosa, answering these questions was far from obvious as she has been enculturated in a milieu dominated by a sense of family and social duty that goes beyond reasoning, a milieu that demands total commitment

The very beginning of the novel highlights this state of affairs in describing her: aged fourteen, standing in front of the prison, entrusted with the task of giving a quilt and water – bottle to her recently jailed mother. Rosa's dilemma when she reaches her twenties cannot be separated from the responsibilities and sense of duty entrusted to her as she was growing-up. Powerful life experiences are determining and limiting her room to manoeuvre as she reaches adulthood and tries to express her own individuality.

She finds she is unable to live in the country of her father. "I couldn't stop myself. I don't know how to live in Lionel's country" (210). She becomes a lonely person as she tries to live a life far away from her father's

associates; she even manages to sneak out of the country to start a new life and she moves to France.

When Rosa arrives in France and reunites with her father's first wife Katya-who left South Africa decades earlier, never to return, she has no definite plans except to see the world, as any other young traveller would do. As time goes by, she realises that under the guise of unlimited freedom and opportunities, the kind of life France has to offer her is nothing but a "paradis invente"(287), an imaginary paradise that erases time and life's asperities and abandons people in a no-man's-land, bereft of their past and with no future. In France, the apogee of Rosa's familial revolt occurs when she languishes in a condition of anonymity liberated from responsibility: "Bernard Chabaliere's mistress isn't Lionel Burger's daughter; she's certainly no accountable to the Future... (304)

Yet, having been seduced by the notion of freedom as a life of maximum individual choice unburdened by commitment, she discovers that such a conception of personal liberty is not absolute but ideological. The chief catalyst for this altered attitude is Zwelinzima Vulindlela, the man she once knew as her adopted black brother. One night Vulindlela-Rosa's Bassie-call her and she realizes Bassie is on the phone, she addresses him as Bassie is merely a nick name, his real name is Zwelinzima Vulindlela. Translated that name means "suffering land". It is interesting to note that Rosa can't pronounce that name. Her move to Europe has brought her far away from that past. She has nearly forgotten the "suffering land" of South Africa and her childhood friend. On a parallel track to Rosa, Zwelinzima has had to free himself from the long shadow of white paternalism, symbolized by the mock-respectful name given to him in childhood, Bassie, "little boss". In his irate, sardonic attack on white meddling in the liberation struggle, Zwelinzima reintroduces into the novel a notion of freedom as entangled in obligation.

Zwelinzima questions to Rosa made her think about what makes her so different from the other whites who have been oppressing blacks. The question haunted him and that gets to the heart of Rosa's dilemma. She is different from the other whites in the sense that she is the daughter of a brave communist martyr. She knows what the stakes are. She knows that things must be changed. However, she has not followed her father's way. Instead, she has acted like a good little white citizen of South Africa.

When she returns to South Africa none of the problems she left behind are any closer to resolution. She is still Lionel Burger's daughter, anti- apartheid militants are still being arrested and imprisoned. She had been

running from her father's memory all this time, trying to find her own identity. Finally she was able to find herself apart from the legacy of her parents. Rosa does not repeat the path of Lionel Burger though. She is going to contribute to the movement in her own way. She does this by becoming a physiotherapist who is helping to heal those black children, who are hurt by the Soweto riots of 1976. In a sense this action is a reflection of Lionel Burger, who was also a doctor. But Rosa is making her own contribution. She is putting her unique skill to work in the struggle. Rosa knows there is a price for her activism and she pays it

The novel's closing conception of freedom is of a bond between an individual and an unavoidable course of action a form of deeply felt necessity, the opposite of whimsy, as such, the novel reaffirms by analogy, Gordimer's own formulation of the writer's freedom. For Gordimer, as for Rosa the challenge is to tack a course between unthinking, stifling orthodoxy and the false freedom of atomistic autonomy.

Burger's Daughter raises issues of universal concerns, issues of mind over matter, action over inertia, life over death. Rosa's personal struggle to come to terms with her father's legacy is one of them. Following in the footsteps of a god-like father is a universal challenge for any dutiful child: to perceiving the ultimate meaning of the actions of one's parents, the pertinence of their ideology and their real power to change fate and destiny.

The study focussed on the loss of identity as defined by Erikson in his theory of human development and tried to analyse the struggle undergone by Rosa to redefine her individual identity. For Nadine Gordimer, the heroine's attempt to empathize with the black other as her fellow in oppression leads her to discover, confront, and set free the other within herself. The study discloses that the loss of identity to a large extent was caused by racism, apartheid and cultural and linguistic differences. It also opens up new arenas like a comparative study of other South African authors who portrays loss of identity in poetry and drama.

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