



---

**The Narrative Perspective of Adolescent Will in  
Gordimer's *My Son's Story*: A Critical Exploration**

**Purushotam Dass**  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Deshbandhu College  
University of Delhi

**Abstract:**

Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* is narrated by the adolescent Will along with an anonymous third-person narrator. Will's adolescent mind makes up the bits and pieces of the story he was not there to experience himself. Thus, the narrative perspective of an adolescent male and his youthful imagination colours the exigencies of the revolutionary gesture of the Blacks against apartheid as Will narrates his father's affair with a white female and his mother's sudden radical transformation into a revolutionary. The politics and historicity of the revolutionary gesture seen through the prism of the adolescent mind provide the novel with a post-modernist narrative twist with fissures and gaps that invites the readers to enter the narrative and construct their own truth. The paper "The Narrative Perspective of Adolescent Will in Gordimer's *My Son's Story*: A Critical Exploration" seeks to probe the role of Will in Gordimer's narrative design.

**Keywords:**

Adolescent narrator Will, Apartheid, *My Son's Story*, Nadine Gordimer, Narrative perspective, Post-colonial, Writer's Commitment.

In the Post-colonial context, writers must affirm their cultural identity, especially when they belong to the third world. Whether Ngugi Wa Thiongo is talking about African culture, Margaret Atwood her Canadian and feminist concerns, or Gabriel Garcia Marquez talking about Latin America, most writers focus on their cultural identity. The Post-colonial writers try to create a decentered sensibility to do away with Euro-centrism. Derek Walcott, in his poems, is trying to talk about the "hybrid" culture of the Caribbeans post-colonial subject, and Pablo Neruda discusses the "salad" culture of the Latin Americans. Both the poets refer that the third world culture is "double, not yet

one” (Homi Bhaba). Both the colonizer and the colonized cultures merge in a contrapuntal way to create an identity. Nadine Gordimer, the feminist writer of South Africa, when she tries to talk about the feminism of the third world, tries to distinguish herself from the European women as the third world women are “doubly colonized”. When they write, their doubly colonized status needs to fight against both patriarchy and European culture. In her famous book “My Son’s Story”, she points out the problem of coloured women in Africa. In her Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech on December 7, 1991, Gordimer states – “It (writing) was, strangely, a double process, creating at the same time both the writer and the very purpose of the writer as a mutation in the agency of human culture.”

Jean-Paul Sartre in *What is Literature?* writes, “The ‘committed’ writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change ... the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it is all about” (Sartre, 14). Nadine Gordimer took the obligation as a writer to “reveal” the unjust system of apartheid. Apartheid began to be institutionalized in 1948 when the National Party Government came to power, and race-related legislation started its journey. In 1949, Nadine Gordimer’s first work of art, *Face to Face*, was published. Kelly Hewson argues in “Making the Revolutionary Gesture: Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer’s Responsibility”, “Understanding along with Barthes that a writer’s choice always faces in two directions – toward society and toward the literature – Gordimer wrestles with the problem of how to reconcile those demands from without to be socially responsible with those demands from within concerning artistic integrity.” (Hewson, 55)

It can be easily said that Nadine Gordimer has been the conscience of her times who fought the racist regimes through her writings. Writing for her is a political act through which she attempted to fight the racist regimes. Her writings portray the struggles to find a just regime for the blacks and the coloured people. Therefore, her writings can easily be termed ‘struggle literature’, which manifests the people’s struggle, especially blacks, to fight the apartheid rule in South Africa.

South African society is racially segregated where the whites economically, culturally, politically, socially, psychologically and emotionally exploited the blacks. Like all the activists of the anti-apartheid regime, she thought that if the South African nation had to prosper in its fundamental terms, then the blacks should be given equal opportunity as that of the whites. In those terms, her writings can be seen as literature dealing with nation-building. Jameson once argued that all third world literature is ‘national allegories.’ From that point of view, Nadine Gordimer’s works are national allegories of South Africa, where she took up the question of apartheid with utmost diligence to portray the inner and outer struggle for seeking a just world.

For Gordimer, writing is an ‘essential gesture as a social being’ (1989: 286), and thus, when *My Son’s Story* was first published in 1990, it immediately caught the attention of the readers worldwide in reflecting on the political turmoil and fractured society of South Africa which was going

---

through various contradictions and contraries. Her position as a 'white' woman writing for the marginalized Blacks made her affirm her commitment to the formation of the cultural identity of the South African nation.

*My Son's Story*, a post-modernist text of a kind, does not follow any chronological order in telling the events. Will discovers Sonny and Hannah coming out of a cinema together on the opening page itself. This scene is constantly constructed and deconstructed throughout the novel. The novel follows a dual narrative structure. The 'I' who is Will recapitulates the past in the present tense, and there is the anonymous third-person narrator. There are a lot of contrary views regarding the identity of the third person narrator in the novel. Susan Greenstein concludes that both the voices are of Will. As a first-person narrator, he's narrating events personally as a son and later standing apart from the events and re-examining them more objectively. But we do not expect the kind of finesse and complications from Will in narrating as this is his first book. Also, his father's betrayal had affected him so profoundly that it also became the reason for his writing the book. This would not allow him to stand out impartially and comment on Sonny's political behaviour and other aspects of his life as the third-person narrator does. Also, there are many discrepancies between the two styles of writings. The narrative of 'I' is more personal and straightforward, while that of the third person is more formal and objective.

The novel represents a split between Gordimer, the actual writer and Will, the proposed writer. This dual structure reflects the fractured society of South Africa. It reinforces that Gordimer could not wholly ignore her identity as a white woman. It represents Gordimer's attachment and detachment from African society. She could not completely associate herself with the African culture but also felt a strong sense of responsibility. The novel's title implies fractured voice as it is as much Sonny's story as Will's.

In the title, Gordimer uses 'Story' to emphasize that it is not an authentic account. She examines the unstable ground between truth and knowledge. The narrator too emphasizes the unreliability of his narrative by saying, "Like all stories, I have made up what I wasn't there to experience myself." Will also states that "I who had discovered him, not he me." The father is constructed by the son, traumatized after discovering his father's affair with another woman. Hence his account cannot be considered authentic. Gordimer creates ambiguities and uncertainties and uses subtle criticism to avoid political censorship. She leaves the end open to scrutiny by not taking any particular stance or coming to definite conclusions.

Gordimer, in her story, dwells on the conscience of male characters. Will, in his narrative, states that this story is "My father's and mine." Even the title excludes the womenfolk. It is a male edifice in which women play no role. We see Aila, Hannah and Baby from Will's and Sonny's perspectives. The radical change in Aila in the second half of the novel seems sudden to Will and the

readers. However, it might not be so as we are not told what was happening in Aila's mind. Gordimer highlights the patriarchal tendency to stereotype women. In her portrayal of Aila initially as the silent and submissive wife, she critiques the black society in which patriarchy was profoundly entrenched. Later in her breaking away, she undermines these patriarchal notions of women. Gordimer, therefore, gives significant space to her female characters.

Gordimer explores the binary of black and white writers in her novel. Michael Chapman (1996), in his book *South African Literatures*, stated that "Oral tradition can never return completely to a pre-colonial starting point... we are reminded that the impact of European settlement has left its mark on a great deal of African expression we are also reminded however that the west... has never succeeded in subsuming other African voices." Gordimer uses the recurring theme of black man/woman as white man/woman's double to question the hegemony of the white. Unlike the white man who is shattered at discovering the blackness within him, as in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a white woman can empathize as she shares the feeling of being marginalized in society. Gordimer tries to resurrect the black voice. In the epigraph to one of her novels, *World of Strangers*, she seeks "a black boy to announce to the old-minded whites the arrival of the rain of the year of corn". In *My Son's Story*, in the end, she constructs a song of a colonized man who struggles to be free and dies in the process. She attempts to give the silent black tongue of South Africa a voice. *My Son's Story* is, thus, a highly complex narrative due to the various ambiguities associated with it. Gordimer successfully critiqued the imperialist mission through her character and portrayal of African society.

Told from the viewpoint of Will, who reflects upon his school teacher/activist father's affair with a white woman and the resultant impact on family relations and local politics, the novel *My Son's Story* deals with the complications of narrative design and intent as Will states, "In our story, like all stories, I have made up what I was not there to experience myself." Will thereby confesses the unreliability of the narrative voice as some of Will's Knowledge is factual; his adolescent incursions concoct the rest into realms of vicarious pleasure. In Nobel Prize Acceptance Lecture, Gordimer also linked youthful imagination with potential authorship – "With adolescence comes the first reaching out to the otherness through the drive of sexuality. For most children, from then on, the faculty of the imagination, manifest in play, is lost in focus on daydreams of desire and love, but for those who are going to be something else in addition: the imagination gains range and extends by the subjective flux of new and turbulent emotions." Thus, when we read the statement by Will, "I am a writer, and this is my first book – that I can never publish", it adds to the intentional internal fallacies of Will's text – where some statements deemed to stand true as against the false ones. – Consequent indeterminacies in intellectual comprehension. The patching together of the narrative with many deliberate gaps and fissures subtly invites the readers to enter and question Will's authorial assumption

Will's imagination becomes the filtering device by which the narrative voice of Sonny, Hannah, Aila gets concentrated into an indirect narration about South Africa. The multiplicity of voices through a single narrator and the corresponding shifts in focalization evident in the novel explore the nature of both the creative act and the connection between the personal and the political. This makes the novel's narrative perspective a particularly relevant prism through which the realization between literature and history can be viewed. Furthermore, as Malashri Lal points out, "Will's limited adolescent mind cannot leap to such philosophical projections, and for the most part of the story, he judges the women by externality, not substance."

Thus, the complexity of the narrative design and perspective through the use of an adolescent narrator and an anonymous third-person narrator, Gordimer makes a concocted narrative of the revolution against apartheid, which dwells into the realm of the community's unconscious. Georg Lukacs in the Preface to *Studies in European Realism* opines that "... every action, thought and emotion of human beings is inseparably bound up with the struggles of the community, i.e. With politics, whether the humans themselves are conscious of this, unconscious of it or even trying to escape from it, objectively their actions, thoughts and emotions nevertheless spring from and run into politics" (Lukacs, 5). This seems to be true about the way the narrative structure of *My Son's Story* is constructed.

## Works Referred:

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Clingman, Stephen. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1986.

Gordimer, Nadine, and Stephen Clingman. *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

Hewson, Kelly, "Making the Revolutionary Gesture: Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer's Responsibility." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, Calgary, AB, Canada. 1988 Oct., 19:4, 55-72.

Lukacs, Georg. *Studies in European Realism*, Howard Fertig; 1st Howard edition, 2002.

Newman, Judie. *Nadine Gordimer*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Sartre, Jean Paul, *What is Literature? France: Gallimard*.