

Reversed Identity, the Problem of Fake Identity, and Counter-Identity in Selected Novels by Nadine Gordimer

Abdalahadi Nimer Abdalqader Abu Jweid^{[a],*}

^[a] Assistant professor of English literature. Faculty of Educational Sciences & Arts, ESA, UNRWA, Amman, Jordan.

*Corresponding author.

Received 3 May 2022; accepted 4 June 2022

Published online 26 June 2022

Abstract

This paper examines reversed identity in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, counter-identity in *Burger's Daughter*, the problem of fake identity in *The Conservationist*. The discussion of these kinds of identity are explicated from a postcolonial perspective. The study sheds light on Gordimer's depiction of identity within cultural, social, and ethnic considerations. The study's methodology relies on the descriptive elaboration of the selected novels' themes related to South Africa in post-apartheid periods when riots broke out for liberation and independence. It depends on some previous studies and critical books on identity in post-colonialism. It offers few analytical comments on Gordimer's perception of identity and how she portrays it in different kinds, namely, reversed, counter, and fake identities. Thus, the analysis is supported by critical arguments about the multifarious meanings and implications of identity.

Key words: Apartheid; Gordimer; Identity; Post-colonialism; South Africa

Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2022). Reversed Identity, the Problem of Fake Identity, and Counter-Identity in Selected Novels by Nadine Gordimer. *Canadian Social Science*, 18(3), 6-10. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/12568>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12568>

1. INTRODUCTION

Nadine Gordimer is an outstanding South African writer. Her writings depict the ordeals of South African people on the verge of social and cultural deterioration due to the

contemporary postcolonial events. The bulk of her writing comprises both apartheid and post-apartheid eras in South Africa. She also deals with the intricate postcolonial issues, such as identity, displacement, diaspora, culture and so forth. Being so, she appropriates the image of South Africa as a country within the broad context of African collective culture and ethnicity. She writes in a descriptive style that conveys to the reader precise impression of the whole fictional plot; and her narrative structure "is linear and without formal challenges, as she uses different focalisers and free indirect discourse" (Mussil, 2021, p.116). In this sense, Gordimer has a universal writing manner that employs discursive literary styles harnessed for the sake of representing the entire South African problems in various themes and techniques.

The thematic and technical attributes of Gordimer's writings are sorely significant as they denote the core of her literary interests. She offers vivid portrayals of the South African people as genuine stereotypes of African individuality as a whole. However, her writings have been described as controversial since they tackle the complex postcolonial issues concerning her country, which led to ban many of her novels; Imraan Coovadia (2020) writes: "novels by Nadine Gordimer, which had not been banned, could be obtained despite their criticisms of government policy" (p.152). Consequently, Gordimer is considered an influential South African literary milestone, and her writings reflect the true sense of the South African postcolonial societies. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the implications of reversed identity in Gordimer's *July's People*, counter-identity in *Burger's Daughter*, the problem of fake identity in *The Conservationist*.

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Reversed Identity in *July's People* (1981)

July's People is set in a fictional post-apartheid atmosphere. The plot begins in medias res, where the

black natives overthrow the white oppressive government and take the office. The Smales family, which is white and led by the parents Maureen and Bam, survive the violent revolution, and they ran away taking with them July, who is their back servant. July provides a safe haven for the Smales by taking them to his native village; a rural place where he was only allowed to make a biennial visit. The family could not adapt to the new life in the villages as they used to luxurious life before the political and racial upheaval. Therefore, they become dependent on the village's population.

The villagers become upset with July's host, and he refuses to outcast them away from the village. He feels responsible for taking care of them. Maureen and Bam decide to separate from each other in order to be able to get along with the villagers who are described as July's people. Therefore, Maureen and Bam could not be able to cope with the villagers easily. However, their children, Royce, Gina, and Victor could befriend the villagers and kindly treat each other.

The Smales could not go outside the village since they are threatened by the violent incidents; and they live under the protection of July who used to be their servant. As such, they undergo social hardships when interact with the villagers. July uses their pick-up truck 'bakkie' to go shopping. To their frustration, Maureen and Bam could not bear this living hardships. Maureen erupts and tells July about their frustrated since she considered herself as generous and kind to July in the past. July gets infuriated by her scathing speech and mistreatment. He begins to prefer Bam to her. He neglects her, and, as retaliation, she meets his beloved woman whom he lives before the violent events. Consequently, she develops quite antagonistic relationship with them. In contrast, Bam could maintain good social affairs with them as a good man, especially when he hunts a pig as a meal for dinner. This action made the villagers respect him more than Maureen because he proved to be a strong and polite man.

Maureen tries to go out with other women in the village for the sake of edible food from the surrounding plants. As time passes, she becomes accustomed to the women's lives. However, July prevents her from accompanying the women shortly after she returns home. Then, he justifies this claiming that she is only a visitor and must stay home, yet, Maureen ascribes his reaction to his wife. That is, he is afraid of Maureen since she might tell his wife about the woman whom he loves. Then, July informs Bam of the village's chief who now knows about their presence among the villagers. Therefore, the chief wants to decide whether they must stay in the village or they might be expelled. As a sequence, Maureen and Bam take their children and meet the chief. At first, they are afraid of the chief's bad decision. That is, he might expel them from the village. Nevertheless, he allows them to stay for long time, but on certain condition. This condition stipulates on Bam to teach the village's people how to

use weapons to protect the village from the danger of the black forces. Yet, Bam refuses this condition claiming that the villagers might get stronger and unified.

Maureen and Bam, therefore, decide to leave the village to save their lives. They also want to save July's life as he is a great supporter to their case. As they go to their hut, they are distracted by the sound of music in the vicinity, and they reach their lodge finding their weapon lost. They become very frightened, yet, they were quickly told that Daniel, who is July's close friend, has stolen the weapon and he went to Johannesburg to join the black military forces. Consequently, they are frustrated by this news; and they go again to the village. In order to change his gloomy mood, Bam takes his children to go fishing. While they are fishing, a helicopter suddenly appears flying over the village. People of the villager and Maureen are scared, and the presence of the helicopter causes great panic. The helicopter lands, and Maureen runs towards it knowing that they are European military forces. He heads straight for the helicopter leaving Bam and her sons behind her because she is only thinking about her survival. She gets into it; and the novel ends at this situation without revealing Bam's and Maureen's destiny.

In this novel, Gordimer deals with identity in terms of reversing the domestic and social roles of white and black races. July, who used to be a black slave, takes care of his previous masters. Bam and Maureen become his dependents as they are under his villages' author and care. The reversal of identity occurs when the July performs the whole authority upon them; and they, consequently, represent the passive side of identity. That is, they do not have a total; control over their destiny as independent individuals since they are evacuated by their former servant. "July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind has always done for their kind" (p.1). Therefore, Bam and Maureen are dominated by July's people's power and social traditions; and July ascends to power and authority due to his race as a black man who indicts and resists the white suppression. In doing so, he preserves his native traditions because "identity involves a 'desire' to preserve the national heritage" (Abu Jweid, 2016, p.537). In this sense, the concept of identity implies the postcolonial cultural residuals that are appropriated to the way by which authors perceive the influence of colonial on traditional social norms.

Post-colonialism, therefore, refers to the drastic changes of the master-slave relationship. That is, colonial renders the masters great power since they exemplify the notion of hegemony; and author convey the meaning of this hegemony through their narrative works "because identity might be influenced by colonial hegemony; and authors could use their dialogic narrative voice to comment on the fictional nature of their texts" (Abu Jweid, 2022, p.21). Being so, postcolonial identity is dialogic i.e., it exemplifies the author's implied message in the narrative text and the characters' explicit voice

which describes the social state of affairs in the master and slave circumferences. Gordimer describes this dialogic relationships via highlighting July's explicit voice when he treats Maureen in his village. This is because the novel is all about the reversal of roles, especially when Bam and Maureen become his dependents. In this case, Gordimer implicitly projects her voice by means of the characters' voice to indict the negative influence of colonialism. Furthermore, she approaches the displacement of The Smakes family which is evacuated by July. Consequently, she perceives this evacuation in terms of the plights of The Smakes in new socio-cultural astrosphere. This evacuation – though it relates to displacement – indicates one aspect of diaspora and its relative concept of acculturation. As such, the concept of acculturation is the mixture of the postcolonial social norms; whereby authors consider “rethinking ‘acculturation’ in relation to diasporic cultures and *postcolonial identities*” (Monereo, 2022, p.101). *The concept of acculturation refers to the transformation process of the master-slave relationship. Similarly, The Smakes does not have any social or colonial control over July in his village. In order words, they are no longer his masters. On the other hand, July is not their slave as he does entirely takes care of them as if they were his own dependents since he would be afraid of the resurrection of the white power again, which is considered “determinant attribute of anxiety”* (Abu Jweid, 2020c, p.12). Thus, July makes The Smakes less powerful to ensure a good life away from fear of the whites' power.

2.2 The Problem of Fake Identity in Gordimer's *The Conservasionist* (1974)

The novel hinges on the life of Mehring who is extremely dissatisfied with his life in apartheid circumstances. His resentment of life lies in the family disintegration conditions which he suffered from. His social ordeals begin when he wife left him alone; and she travels to America. His son, Terry, is very liberal as he leads his life as a gay criticizing his fathers' conservative life. Then, his colleagues and friends are no longer in accord with his capitalist and conservative way of life. As a response, he seeks to find sensible meaning for his life by buying four hundred acres away from the demarcation of the city. Consequently, he becomes a businessman sine he employs black people as farmers to run his properties, especially farming. He pays intermittent visits to his farms as a foreigners, then, he justifies his farming as vested interest to reduce the exacted taxes. That is, he believes that farming is only beautiful and profitable when it is economically fruitful. Furthermore, he sees in farming an outlet for his romantic adventures. Then, he dates his girlfriend, Antonia, and goes to the farm as a place for his amatory rendezvous.

Jacobus, who is a black supervisor, accidentally finds a human corpse when he is walking round the farm. He instantly notifies the police of the corpse, yet, the police

decide to bury the body in the same place without taking legal or cautionary procedures simply because the dead body is black. The police's inhumane reaction towards the body terrifies Mehring as he thinks that black people are undermined and neglected. One day, flood flowed over the land bringing the buried body into the surface. Soon, the black workers sympathize with the dead man and arrange official burial actions as if he had been one of their friends or relatives. In doing so, they extremely take care of the burial traditions signifying their respect of their race. As a response, Mehring feels that his burial traditions will not be as respectful as the dead man since he personally saw the police's apathetic reaction to the dead man. He imagines his death as less significant than anybody else although he is white and master of the farm. Thus, the blacks only find meaning in their lives by dignifying their race and this appears when they bury the black body only because he is a part of their race; and Mehring will remain to pursue reasonable meaning of his futile life but in vain.

The case of fake identity in the novel relates to Mehring's inability to cope with the black community. He could not be equal to the black though he is a white master. His ethnic hegemony does not help as he could not elevate his value as a colonial master; and “as the black slaves are confined in these places, they lose their human true identity; and consequently, they become subhuman” (Abu Jwied, 2020b, p.8). Mehring, who is a white man, exemplifies the white oppressive race which is devoid of its humane traits as they persecute the black due to the fact that “the black people were deprived of their human dignity. They are treated in a lower position that affects their identity and human dignity” (Abu Jweid, 2021b, p.25). Furthermore, Gordimer portrays Mehring's dissatisfaction with his white race through his speech that is presented as a literary speech and behaviors which “have particular relevance to the interpretation of the discourse” (Abu Jweid, 2020d, p.207). The sense of fake identity involves the life of Mehring in a racially overwhelmed society. Gordimer depicts his identity fakeness in factional experience. For this reason, fake identity is presented fictional texts which “are closely linked to other areas of *identity* formation, such as gender, race, social class and national *identity*” (Lojo-Rodriguez *et al.*, 2021, p.125).

2.3 Counter-Identity in *Burger's Daughter* (1979)

Like many of her apartheid novels, Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* deals with apartheid issues of the time. The protagonist is Rosa Burger whose father, Lionel, is an activist of anti-apartheid movements. Burger family is white, and Lionel is accused of grand treason for supporting black case. He dies shortly after three-year sentence in prison. Her mother, Cathy, also dies in prison when Rosa becomes fourteen-year old. The whole family is accused of treason because they had been demonstrating against the white apartheid government; and they welcome all races to settle in their house for the sake of peace and

refuge from the persecutory government. They Baasie who is black boy and lost his father in prison at the hands of the apartheid system. Baasie and Rosa become close friends, and they seem as if they were brother and sister. The Burger family suffers from oppression since they are serious activists in South African Communist Party, which had led to their imprisonment many times. As Rosa grows up, she is separated from Baasie at the age of nine and they could not contact each other by all means.

Rosa decides to sell their house because it is empty. She gets closer to her boyfriend Conrad whom she met during her academic days. Conrad is almost an intruder since he keeps asking her about her docile nature in obeying the orders concerning opposing the apartheid government. For this reason, she leaves him and depends on herself by working as a physiotherapist. Then, she goes to Soweto where black university students do not accept supporting and funding efforts from the whites claiming that they will get their liberty without the aim of the whites. Rosa is accused of being a communist like her parents. Yet, she is given a passport by the representative authorities. As a result, she travels to France and stays with her father's first wife, Katya. During her stay, she is introduced to Bernard Chabaliere, a good academic man from Paris. Soon they fall in love; and he convinces her to go with him to Paris.

Rosa accepts his offer, but she prefers spending some weeks in London before they go to Paris. When she feels at ease and comfort in Europe, she could introduce herself as a member from Burger family because she stays away from the oppressive authorities. The media, therefore, sheds light on her experience and she is invited to many events. Strikingly, she meets Baasie in one of these events, yet, he gets very angry as she reveals his real name to the media. Baasie's real name is Zwelinzima Vulindlela; and he is extremely infuriated by her speech saying that the loss of her parents is not more important than the loss of many lives of black people. Then, he tells her that he is self-independent and does not need her support as he used to be. To her disappointment, Rosa feels guilty of taking care of Baasie as her childhood friend whom she long mourned and loved. Consequently, she reneges on her plans of going to France with Bernard and, instead, she decides to go back to South Africa. Upon her repatriation, she immediately goes to Soweto and resumes her career as psychotherapist. Soon riots rise up when school children protest against the ad quality of their education. The violent riots devastated the lives of many white and rich people. The oppressive apartheid government sent police that harshly obliterated the demonstrations in which many black people were killed. A year later, all anti-apartheid organizations are banned. Rosa is detained in this campaign as she opposed the white government oppressive treatment of the blacks, just like her parents. After that, her lawyer thinks that things will worsen soon

because she belongs the South African Communist Party and African National Congress that support the students' demonstration. Thus, the novel ends with her waiting for legal charges against her anti-apartheid activities.

Rosa embodies the notion of counter identity by both rejecting the oppressive apartheid system and its European culture when she travelled to Paris. Gordimer presents Rosa's counter identity through the narrative structure, simply because the author "unravels into numerous narrative points of view under one organizing narrative consciousness" (Abu Jweid, 2020a, p.6). This narrative consciousness is a direct indication of Gordimer's obsession with pursuing the radical transformation of the native identity in South Africa. Her authorial voice is an appropriate way to deal with the South African social issues after the apartheid due to the fact that "the author's disposition is conveyed in terms of the implicit appears in the narrative's action" (Abu Jweid, 2020e, p.102). Moreover, Rosa suffers from some patriarchal problems when she is mistreated at the hands of the South African people, which "is a representation of poor feminist individualism" (Abu Jweid, 2021c, p.6). The negative position of Rosa in her society relates to the bad conditions in South Africa. Gordimer constructs Rosa's personality through fictional descriptions "achieved through imagined unusual situations that are strongly developed to extremes in order to prove some point, and sometimes great ingenuity is exercised to make dreams seem like reality by depicting the fictional characters internal thoughts" (Abu Jweid, 2021a, p.9). Rosa exemplifies the concept of counter identity as she supports the case of the oppressed blacks in order to become independent since apartheid is related "a time during which regional societies have continued to struggle to find their own independent identities" (Boyett et al., 2021, p.1090).

3. CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the implications of reversed identity in Gordimer's *July's People*, counter-identity in *Burger's Daughter*, the problem of fake identity in *The Conservationist*. The discussion of these kinds of identity has revealed the essence of Gordimer's treatment of identity in South Africa as a way of depicting the entire postcolonial Africa. The significance of these reviews lies in the exploration reversed identity, counter-identity, and fake identity in the selected works. Though the paper has briefly explicated them, their discussion would pave the way for further explanation of their postcolonial nuances in future researches. Furthermore, the discussion of these kinds of identity has largely depended on some of my previous researches in post-colonialism for the sake of discovering new themes and literary meanings projected in the course of the selected novels.

The discussion of three kinds of identity, moreover, bridges the gap of approaching the concept of identity in different postcolonial contexts. That is, the selected novels could be examined in terms of culture, society, ethnicity, and feminism not only in South Africa but also in the entire African states. This is because South Africa shares all African countries the same destiny and colonial experience inflicted upon them in the past. Accordingly, the selected novels are authentic replicas of the African precolonial and postcolonial experience Gordimer's fiction. Another significance of this study relates to the discussion of identity from both literary and critical perspectives. The study has accentuated the major themes of the selected novels. Then, they have been supported by some of critical arguments deduced from my previous papers as well as related books in order to clarify the meaning of postcolonial identity in its parallel implication in the critical studies. Thus, the study has pinpointed the selected novels through explaining the literary and critical implications of reversed identity, counter-identity, and fake identity, which are rarely tackled in previous studies.

REFERENCES

- Abu Jweid, A. (2020)a. Autobiographical peculiarities in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 21(3), 5-9.
- Abu Jweid, A. (2020)b. Aversion and desire: The disruption of monolithic ambivalence in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 21(1), 6-15.
- Abu Jweid, A. (2022). Caribbean Displacement and the Question of Oppression and Cultural Changes of Post-colonialism in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*. *Canadian Social Science*, 18(2), 17-24.
- Abu Jweid, A. (2020)c. Fear mechanism in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 21(2), 12-18.
- Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2021)a. Modernism's rejection of tradition through literary experimentation in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 17(3), 8-11.
- Abu Jweid, A. (2020)d. Regional commitment in Eudora Welty's "Petrified Man." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*, 7(3), 206-214.
- Abu Jweid, A. N. A. (2021)b. The duality of magic and memory as the structure of narrative repetition in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 20(2), 25-32.
- Abu Jweid, A. (2016). The Fall of National Identity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. *PERTANIKA*, 23(5), 529-540.
- Abu Jweid, A. (2020)e. Time travel as a tool of satiric dystopia in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*, 7(3), 100-107.
- Abu Jweid, A. (2021)c. Women individuality: A critique of patriarchal society in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 22(2), 5-11.
- Bardolph, J., & Viola, A. (2001). *Telling stories: Postcolonial short fiction in English*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Coovadia, I. (2020). *Revolution and non-violence in Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Mandela*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gordimer, N. (1981). *July's People*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Lojo-Rodriguez, L. M., Sacido-Romero, J., & Pereira-Ares, N. (2021). *Postcolonial youth in contemporary British fiction*.
- Monereo, C. (2022). *The identity of education professionals: Positioning, training, and innovation*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Incorporated.
- Mussi, F. (2021). *Literary legacies of the South African TRC: Fictional journeys into trauma, truth, and reconciliation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.