

A Modern Miranda: Revisiting Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days*

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Abstract:

I believe that it takes an extraordinary level of consciousness to go against the grain of mainstream ideas and that, I discovered in the protagonist Helen Shaw, upon my reading of celebrated writer Nadine Gordimer's debut novel *The Lying Days*. Upon juxtaposition of this novel along Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* with which it bears strong parallels, we shall observe that unlike the traditional Miranda who follows her father's footsteps in a passive manner, Helen appears to be more of a revolutionary, a modern Miranda who forges out her own principles in life, independent of what is imposed on or essentially expected of her. This paper then concentrates on Helen's rebellion against her own race, considering education as the fulcrum of the discussion, besides connecting the issue to the broader vignette of today's children becoming passive automatons. It is interesting to see how in this Coming-of-age novel set in the backdrop of anti-Apartheid Africa, Gordimer renders a critique of the system of education, that begins in a confessional tone and goes on to become increasingly louder, culminating in the protagonist's ultimate subversion of every aspect of the education given her. Apparently, this is important in the study of postcolonial texts as it offers us a newer insight to colonial behavior. It is also worthwhile to make note of the seemingly innocent yet outspoken ways a writer employs to counter the discriminatory practices of her own society.

Key Words: Nadine Gordimer, Althusser, Miranda, Prospero, postcolonial, Apartheid, ideological state apparatus, Eurocentricism, Caliban, revolutionary

Introduction:

Thematically, Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days* is read as a semi-autobiographical novel published in the year 1953, that deals with the anti-Apartheid movement in Africa, as seen through the eyes of the white female narrator, whose trajectory from a little girl to an adult participant in the fight against Apartheid, is also projected in the novel in the genre of what is known as bildungsroman. A very significant aspect of the novel implicitly presented is its subtle criticism of the quality of education. Although the backdrop is of the Black struggle against Apartheid in Africa, the case of education holds a universal significance across time and space, more so in the world of colonialism for it bears the ability to mould the orientations of people, indispensably perhaps because theoretically as well as in practice, the mind is considered as a *tabula rasa*.

Althusser says that the world runs through a system of what is known as the State Apparatus, of which education is a major component of its ideological branch, besides others. Through the system of education, the State controls its subjects and sets up a kind of pre-decided boundary upon the governed subjects, regarding the kind, quality as well as extent of knowledge to

be disseminated. This is more significant during the times of imperialism and colonialism because the governments are responsible for coming up with an education system based on Eurocentricism. The ruling classes had to design their course and curricula in such a way that the subjected natives begin to see themselves as inferior and their pale masters as superior and 'civilized' while their own children had to live an illusory life of make-believe.

It is generally believed that education, both formal as well as informal, plays a very significant role in the holistic development of a child. Since childhood, he or she is put into this system of education which is considered to make him or her grow up as a good citizen of the nation, to help them become what the society wants them to be. Today it is a much debated idea as to whether or not the overall development of a child is achieved from this education, as many critics like to argue that a rigid system of education leads to the ultimate destruction of childhood. Children are not allowed to pursue their dreams nor are they given time and space to play. They are confined to the limitations of a cold, concrete apartment-culture, isolated from the lively, thriving, breathing world outside, in a way akin to Prospero's raising Miranda in an isolated island.

It remains to be seen how Helen puts up a brave fight against the normative standards of her own community. The task is to trace her trajectory from a young girl reading Jane Austen to one who reaches a mature understanding of the world around her, while embracing a Bohemian lifestyle, unlike what her Victorian education would perhaps have made out of her.

The Making of the Modern Miranda

In Gordimer's novel, Helen Shaw says,

"To me brought up into the life of a South African mine, stories of children living the ordinary domestic adventures of the upper-middle class English family- which was the only one that existed for children's books published in England in the thirties- were weird and exotic enough... I had never read a book in which I myself was recognizable"(11)

It is outwardly mentioned that she is not even remotely able to relate to what is being taught to her. At this point, we see Gordimer being critical of Helen's formal education. She lives in a mining area in South Africa and there she is being made to read Jane Austen-novels, books from the bygone Victorian England, known for its insensitivity and its espousal of a life based on strict code of conduct, morality, ethics and its confinement of women to the realm of tea and trivialities, manners and mannerisms. At first glance, these lines simply appear to us a mere lamentation of a child uninterested in her studies. Upon closer analysis, we may observe that she uses the words "weird and exotic" here for upper middle class English life. Our knowledge of readings associated with colonialism tells us that words of this kind had been used by the colonial masters to describe anything that belonged to the 'Other' world. Helen's use of these words for the life of the ruling class is an unsettling rendition of their assumed superiority, a clear destabilization of the status quo of the colonizers.

Also, the fact the Helen is well aware of her inability to connect to what is being taught her builds up the idea that she is going to read between the lines, that she is not going to take things for granted, that she is subverting an entire system of established notions propagated by those bearing authoritative power. So, Helen confesses,

"And I understood that almost all of my life at home, on the Mine, had been like that, conducted on a surface of polite triviality that was insensitive to the real flow of life that was being experienced, underneath, all the time, by everybody. The fascination of the gap between the two came to me suddenly."(Gordimer, 69-70)

The dichotomy between what is taught and what is in reality comes to her as a kind of revelation in an epiphanic moment of realization. These lines again resonate with Miranda's upbringing in that remote island far away from the reality of life. But it is imperative to call her a modern Miranda because of her cognition of the fact that there is a real world outside the cocoon of her aristocratic yet trivial existence. Nowhere in the novel do we see her passively complying with the world of her parents or the white Eurocentric world that they represent. Though at certain instances we see her acting out her parents' wishes as in the dance program her mother made her participate in, nevertheless the satirical vein is well identified in her very description of the same. Like the age old saying goes- Morning shows the Day- at the very outset of the novel, we see young Helen going out on an exploration all by herself. That is when we expect something unusual, something offbeat, some revolutionary spark going to come off her at latter stages. Perhaps, it also contributes to her forming her own opinions grounded on absolute reality, divested of all illusions being set up for her by her Victorian English education.

Again, when she observes the silent protest being carried out by the Mine workers for the poor food that was being given them, she makes a note of their behaviour: "Nobody trampled the stars of tight-packed pansies, nobody bent the mound of white lilies"(27) These words are highly reflective of the polite manners and good behaviour exhibited by the natives, quite contrary to what her parents believed them to be doing. Through her observation we get to know that the natives were demonstrating a peaceful protest, hardly showing any sign of aggression or any kind of unacceptable behaviour. Helen's father calls them 'little loafers and thieves'(20) and that immediately reminds us of Caliban being perceived as "a thing/Most brutish" (I.ii.359-360). So, in a way her father assumes the role of Prospero in rebuking the natives for something that they are clearly not. But when Helen goes walking through the mining town, she discovers them to be quite 'harmless'. Clearly, it means that she had been told they were 'harmful' at some point of time. She questions herself: "Was there something to be afraid of?"(8) Eventually she goes on to realize that the natives were only "sullen with the defensive sullenness of the defenseless; noisy and merry with the glee of the innocent"(14). Thus, she discovers the opposite of what she had been taught by her family, she discovers that the natives are 'defenseless' and 'innocent'. The fabrications of the white community in labeling and stereotyping the natives gradually unfold before her, thereby creating a path for her to choose a life away from the bitterness that she discovers even in her own family once she grows up enough to become a follower of her own conscience. Hence, the bildungsroman genre as well as the apt title of the book *The Lying Days*- the days of darkness wherein she had been living deprived of the light of reality.

Helen says, "Nobody told me love was warm." (66) Thus, the poignancy of a child's innocent mind and life being darkened by ideas of unreasonable hatred towards the less privileged is being highlighted. This is further affirmed in Ludi's words: "That life on the Mine is the narrowest, most mechanical, unrewarding existence you could think of in any nightmare"(49) This sums up Helen's societal background that had next to nothing to contribute to her growth and

development. Further, the use of the word 'nightmare' lucidly evokes the tussle between an inescapable hellish condition and an intense desire to escape.

That the white community was completely indifferent to what was happening around in the world is evident from her confession: "We were having supper with the radio tuned in over-loudly to the BBC news... the cultured voice talking of bombs and burning towns was an inevitable accompaniment to the evening meal"(52) In her simple description of a domestic scene, however, Helen appears to be critical of not just the inhumane treatment being meted out to the natives but also of their insensitivity and indifference reflected in their overtly casual attitude of enjoying regular meals to the news of 'bombs and burning towns'. That is where Gordimer's critique of the unjust conditions of her society prevails.

Helen's sensitivity however, is well manifested in her empathizing with Mary, the fellow Black student in her University, who, Helen witnesses, lives in a place that was in no way conducive to an atmosphere of academic studies. Albeit to the horror of her parents, she brings in Mary to her own house for a stay. Thus, begins the action of the rebel in her. Furthermore, she decides to leave her house as she finds it unbearable to live with her parents under the same roof in conflicting terms. This final breaking of ties is perhaps, also symbolic of doing away with the world of her parents and their colonial ideas. The making of the modern Miranda is therefore, complete. Her subsequent adoption of a Bohemian lifestyle thus, adds a new episode to her book of rebellion.

Conclusion:

What is thus, significant about this story is that had Helen been an unthinking individual, she would have perhaps become another product of colonial mindset, another believer as well as perpetuator of Eurocentric ideas like her mother. Fortunately, she seems to be a skeptical soul who likes to question given ideas. She seems to be a self-learner. She is neither judgemental nor does she blindly accept what is told her, but applies her own conscience. She does not grow up like other white children.

Helen's observation, consciousness and application of conscience are the key factors that distinguish her from other children of her age. Here, in the place of an 'Othered' Caliban verbally fighting Prospero, we encounter Prospero's own flesh and blood, his daughter Miranda rebelling against the wrongdoings of her own father.

Emerson had remarked: "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." This is applicable in the case demonstrated by the author in real life as well as her fictional creation Helen. We need to remind ourselves at this point that the novel is semi-autobiographical. We know that Gordimer is a White writer and for a White writer to go against the mainstream by critiquing the European mode of education or largely by taking an Anti-Apartheid stance, perhaps it requires first-hand experience. But certainly it demands immense courage, acute observation as well as realization of the reality, and a sufficient amount of empathy. As seen through the many instances in this paper, these essential qualities are embodied in her protagonist Helen- the skeptical, revolutionary, modern Miranda.

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