

## **Burger's Daughter: Different Shades of Rosa's Character**

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### **Abstract**

The heroine of *Burger's Daughter* is conflicted between her personal and political life. The dilemma that haunts her till the end of the text is whether to enjoy the life she wants or to give her life to the anti-apartheid struggle. Rosa is standing in between of white racism and black consciousness. Beginning from her childhood, she is trying to get her individual identity. After the death of her parents, too, she is called "Burger's Daughter". This label became immortal. She cannot escape from it. It was the result of the constant struggle and sacrifices of her parents for black lives. At once, she decides to get rid of this identity. She has to come back to her roots after spending sometime in Europe. After coming back to South Africa, she finds the reason of her living. She starts living as "Burger's Daughter" again by serving as a physiotherapist in one hospital. Therefore, the journey of Rosa is for the search of her identity; breaking from it and again getting back. Throughout the journey different shades of her character are penned by Gordimer.

**Key words:** anti-apartheid, individuality, identity, search, roots, journey

### **Introduction**

*Burger's Daughter* is completely about the protagonist Rosa Burger's life before and after the death of her parents. It is divided in three parts. In the first part, Rosa is in South Africa. It is about how she lives after the death of her parents. At one point of time, she felt that she is under constant watch of people surrounding her. She was fed up with that. She decided to settle in France. There she lives with her father's first wife Katya. It was completely new world for her. There is no one who recognizes her as "Lionel's Daughter". She was absolutely surrounded by love and pleasure. She started liking the life there. Suddenly, in third part, something happened one night and she decided to go back to South Africa. She accepted the job at Baragwanath Hospital to serve disable black children. She realized that she is the daughter of a social activist.

Her life should be different. She can't escape from her duties. The time was of Soweto Revolt of 1976. Rosa was also arrested and detained along with a group of other people.

All these events and circumstances delineate different kind of Rosa. Sometimes, she becomes a daughter, sometimes a lover, sometimes an unknown person, a loving sister, a spectator, a social activist like her parents, a prisoner and a doctor. These many different characters are performed single handedly by the protagonist in the book. She learns from the happenings every time and grasping but not reacting. Her most powerful decision can be called is that of serving at Bargwanath Hospital. Till that she was conflicted between whether to live her personal life or a political and social life like her parents. It was her constant dilemma. After living in Europe, she realized this was not the life she meant for. Her constant search for her identity is drawn in the story.

### **As a Daughter**

The character of Rosa as a child is depicted as very understanding at the age of fourteen. How she harmonizes her life between school and as a child of activists. It is the art of the author to present how much difficult it is for the child that brings up in the political milieu. It requires a bunch of conscience to accept the situation at a very young age. Here are the excerpts from the text:

She probably had not slept well the previous night and had not had time to eat between hurrying home from school and coming to the prison...She asked to see the headmistress and requested to be allowed to go home early in order to take comforts to her mother...The other girls in her class seemed unaware of what had happened. They did not read the morning newspapers, listen to the news on the radio, nor were they aware of politics... (Gordimer 05)

As Rosa grew up she understands that everyone in the society does not think that her father is a good person. There is mixture of opinion. If Rosa would not ask anyone then also people would tell her what they think about her father. She knew that the letters were coming to her home. She was not able to read each of them but once she was allowed by her mother to read: "It said her father was a devil and a beast who wanted to rob and kill, destroying Christian civilization." (Gordimer 13) There are other people also who think that her father is a godly figure.

Rosa was brought up differently from other children. Her parents let her know that going into jail is part of their responsibility. To visit the imprisoned person is as normal to visit a patient at hospital. So, Rosa never found something strange when her parents were arrested or imprisoned because from the early childhood she saw it. At the age of eight years, Rosa was able

to tell on which kind of trial her mother or father were, whether it was Treason Trial or something else. She could understand that the bail was refused and her parents could not come home. She opines: “I could not be visualized leaving, living any other life than the one necessity-political necessity...” (Gordimer 58). When Cathy Burger was imprisoned Rosa stood outside the prison with eiderdown in her hands to convey secret political messages to her mother.

Frequently, she uses the phrase “I am my father’s daughter”. It claims that she is always associated in the matter of identity with her father. Whenever there is mention of “Rosa Burger”, there is always “Lionel Burger”. She is possessed with “Burger Political Heritage” all the time. Whether she wants to answer the questions by people or not does not matter. For Rosa he was something other than her father. Rosa also discusses Lionel’s prison experiences. The prisons were dark because there was no sunlight. Lionel said there were “only the coloured reflection of some sunsets” (Gordimer 60).

### **As a Lover**

Rosa had two love affairs in the story. One was with the guy named Conrad in South Africa and with Bernard Chaballier in France. None of her lovers could understand her sentiments. Rosa talks about her parents, struggle, imprisonment and death with them. They found her life very disinterested. None of them have any kind of respect for Rosa’s parents. Conrad tells her:

The day somebody said look, that’s Rosa Burger...from the first time...I have the impression you’ve grown up entirely through other people. What they told you was appropriate to feel and do. How did you begin to know yourself? You go through the motions...what’s expected of you. What you’ve come to rely on. (Gordimer 42)

Conrad suggests her that she should come out of her identity as “Burger’s daughter”. Rosa was brought up in that political atmosphere therefore she cannot completely detach herself from it. While talking to Conrad, Rosa described everything happened to her and her family. Gordimer tells us the story in this manner. Conrad thinks that going to the prison is very small thing for Burger family. Rosa asks him: “Why should I go to prison?” He answers: “Well you will, won’t you. Sooner or later.” (Gordimer 45) This became reality in the third part of the novel when Rosa was imprisoned along with other activists.

During the conversation between Rosa and Conrad, the readers can visualize how Rosa and her family’s life was different from others. People who visit Burger’s house were not coming for parties or celebrations. Women who visit would not go for shopping with Cathy Burger. “They came together to make revolution.” (Gordimer 46) To make a revolution for them is to plan a picnic or summer holidays. It was very normal for them.

Rosa falls in love with a guy named Bernard Chabalier who was married and having children. He was a professor at lycee. He was doing his Ph.D. They decided to set a trip for Corsica. They started living like a couple there. He insists Rosa to stay in Paris. He would find her a job of her kind. When he talks about his wife and children, he says: “I live among them, not with them.” (Gordimer 310) After few days, they decided to go to London. Chabalier’s colleague was there who was doing same kind of research. The idea of going to London was liked by Rosa. They went back to Paris and started preparing going to London. Chabalier had some work in Paris therefore he was going to join Rosa after few weeks. He promised Rosa to come there. Until, Rosa would go there and install herself. There was one flat in Holland Park. She would live there.

After reaching at London, Rosa telephoned Flora Donaldson. Chabalier postponed his arrival in London for two weeks more and there was shortage of staff members. There in Paris Chabalier tried to contact Anti-Apartheid Committee chairman to find some work for Rosa. He used terms like: “an unnamed member of a white family of prominent victims of apartheid.” (Gordimer 319)

### **As a Sister**

Rosa has two brothers: Tony & Baasie. Unfortunately, she lost both of them. Tony met to accidental death that shocked Burger family a lot and especially Rosa as at last she was the only living member. Tony was drowned in the swimming pool. The author did not reveal the incident of Tony’s death in single portion of the text. Instead of that, in the first part of the text, Rosa mentions Tony in every chapter. How was he and how he died? Rosa remembers her brother very much. Whenever there is mention of death and loss, she would definitely remember her brother. The swimming pool at Burger’s house was the place to visit and enjoy for everyone. Apart from that it was the place where Tony drowned and died. There was no color bar in swimming. The blacks were not able to swim in the municipal swimming pools. Therefore, Lionel gave lessons of swimming to the black children. In the same swimming pool, Tony was drowned. He jumped into swim and suddenly started drowning. All were present there. Cathy carried him out and took him into her lap. She tried every trick to save him but she was failed. Lily was holding Rosa and screaming.

While Baasie was an adopted black child by Rosa’s parents. He suddenly appears in the second and third part of the text. In London, Rosa attended one party where she met Baasie. It took time for her to recognize her brother. She had not seen him from the years. At the same day, she got a call from Baasie at midnight. He talked with Rosa in a very rude manner. He was trying to establish that what Lionel Burger did for his country, the same sacrifices many blacks did for South Africa but they were not honored like Lionel. Just because he was white, he was

overestimated. Baasie denies Rosa to call him ‘Baasie’ and his name is now ‘Zwelinzima Vulindlela’. This name was indicative because the meaning of ‘Zwelinzima’ is ‘suffering land’. Rosa seems very attached to her brother but he did not have any feelings towards her. He started hating whites. He forgets how he was treated and brought up by Burger’s family.

Actually, during the party where Rosa and Baasie met, there were people who were praising Lionel Burger and ANC for their workings for the South Africa. They recognized Rosa and began asking questions about Lionel. There were people from media also. There was one journalist of *The Guardian*. He was keenly interested in taking Rosa’s interview. All these things enraged Baasie. His original father Vulindlela was also killed in prison but it was not taken into consideration by white media. They were only interested in the sacrifices of ‘whites for the blacks’ and ‘not the blacks for the blacks’. Baasie says Rosa on the phone:

Everyone in the world must be told what a great hero he was and how much he suffered for the blacks. Everyone must cry over him and show his life on television and write in the papers. Listen, there are dozens of our fathers sick and dying in prison, killed in prison. It’s nothing. I know plenty blacks like Burger. It’s nothing, it’s us, we must be used to it, it’s not going to show on English television. (Gordimer 328)

It does not strike Baasie that a white man was a political prisoner. He opines: “Even when we get free they’ll want us to remember to thank Lionel Burger.” (Gordimer 329) He also says that blacks are suffering today because of whites. He asks Rosa to forget her ‘black brother’ forever. Rosa starts shouting on the phone. After putting the phone, she cried a lot. She couldn’t believe that she was talking to her brother. Rosa felt that Baasie was drunk while he was talking on the phone. This phone call inspired Rosa to go back to her mother country South Africa and serve the needed people. She expressed that it changed her life altogether.

### **As a Doctor & Social Activist**

In the third part, Rosa accepts the job at Bargwanath Hospital, Johannesburg to treat the children who cannot walk properly. Now she decided to forget every one that prevents her from becoming ‘Burger’s Daughter’. She calls Baasie a bastard who could not thank her parents. She starts hating Chabaliar too because he said: “Your father! It’s absurd.” (Gordimer 342) She cannot listen a single word for her father who sacrificed for the rights of the blacks. She realized that what kind of life she should live now. She cannot stay with people who cannot respect her family and their sentiments. To sacrifice the whole life for others is not everyone’s cup of tea. Travelling in other countries make her aware how much others have understood her. She cannot stay away from the life that Lionel Burger’s daughter should live.

Rosa's job as a physiotherapist was to teach the children to walk who were crippled by born. It was the time of Soweto Uprising of 1976 in South Africa. The hospital of Johannesburg at that time included not only children who were crippled but also who were shot during the protest. The school riots resulted in the condition that hospitals were filled with injured children. The police officers were shooting with machine guns on children. The students were firm on their decision to boycott the schools. They were preventing every single black child from going to school.

Rosa says that the children were not able to spell but they knew why they were fighting or dying. They could understand that the wealth their mothers and fathers have gained is transformed into white man's property. They knew that if they would keep on walking, police would come and kill them. She remembers her father by saying that he would not be happy if she and her brother Tony would walk towards police and guns smilingly. At that time, she wanted to express the worries of black parents. It was not easy to let the children involve into riots.

On 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1977, many organizations and black newspapers were banned. Number of people were banned, arrested or detained, they were Africans, Indians or Coloreds. On the same day many whites were also starting arrested or house-arrested or banned. One of them was Rosa Burger. When she returned to her home after completing her job, three police officers were waiting there to arrest her. The senior of them was Captain Jaarseveld. He told Rosa that he knew Lionel Burger very well. There were no charges against her. She didn't know till how long she would be kept. Her lawyer was Theo Santorini. When she was imprisoned, she found that Clare Terblanche and Marisa Kgosana were also imprisoned along with other women. They successfully passed messages with each other. Marisa Kgosana invented new way of reaching to Rosa. She said that she wanted to do some spinal ailment and for that sake she came to meet Rosa twice a week. It was a question for state authority what Rosa did in London and France. Whether she alleged to the anti-apartheid activists working there.

When Rosa was detained under Section 6 of Terrorism Act, she was not allowed the visitors but when she became trial-prisoner she was allowed those privileges. Among the visitors there were Flora Donaldson and Brandt Vermuelen. Even though they were under surveillance during those meetings. They discussed family matters. Flora marked that Rosa had not changed much but had become livelier than before. In the last paragraph of the text, Rosa wrote one letter to Madame Bagnelli who was in France. She wrote in the letter that in her prison cell there is a water-mark of light coming at every evening. The same thing happened with Lionel Burger when he was imprisoned; he shared with Rosa.

## **Conclusion**

It can be said that Rosa's character changes altogether after her visit to Europe. Her quest of identity ends when she returns back to South Africa. She finds the reason of her living. Her losses are remarkable throughout the book. After the loss of her parents and brothers, her character as daughter or sister is ended. She becomes alone in her journey. Though she meets number of people, there was no one to understand her sentiments but finally she carries the "Burger Political Heritage". She performs the role that perhaps expected by her parents from her.

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