

## Political Activism and Family Matters in Nadine Gordimer's My Son's Story (1990)

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### Abstract

*Before independence, South Africa experienced her most socio-political turbulences because of Apartheid. Peter Abrahams, John Maxwell Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer depict racial discrimination, political and sexual violence and social injustice in the context of Apartheid. The aims of this article is to portray "political affairs", "family matters" and private passions in Nadine Gordimer's My Son's Story. It also brings to light Sonny's motivation to become a political activist and join the blacks in the resistance against racial discrimination.*

### Keywords

apartheid; racial discrimination;  
sexual passion; resistance;  
liberation



## I. Introduction

In the context of Apartheid in South Africa, Peter Abraham and John Maxwell Coetzee respectively in *Mine Boy* (1946) and *Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1990) and *Disgrace* (2013) depict racial segregation, separate development, social injustice, political turbulences, etc. Nadine Gordimer published *My Son's Story* (1990) to underscore the threshold of the collapse of Apartheid and the transition of majority government. This article aims at displaying "political affairs" and "family matters". It also portrays in complex ways how Sonny associates the two "worlds" during Apartheid.

The first part pinpoints Sonny's subterfuges to mingle political activities and his professional career. The second part focuses on his political and sexual passions, and the extent to which Hannah contributes to his struggle against racial discrimination. The last part lays emphasis on Sonny's family matters and his particular relationships with his son, Will.

## II. Review of Literatures

### 2.1 Political Activism and Sexual Passion

The connection of the two is important in the resistance against racial discrimination in the context of Apartheid. The commitment, danger, and thrill of clandestine love and underground politics are one. The narrator says: sexual happiness and political commitment were one. The subterfuges of an illicit love made the frankness of its emotion possible; the subterfuge of resistance made frankness in a lying society possible (Gordimer, 1990, 122-125). He stages that the cause was the lover, the lover the cause (Gordimer, 1990: 122). The writer focuses on Aila's beauty and Hannah's plainness and whiteness. Politics and sexuality are solidly mingled during Apartheid. Sonny's political activities is associated with his private sexual intercourse with the human right activist, Hannah.

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There is no separated activity in Sonny's two worlds. His sexual passion takes precedence over his political activities and private life: In her-needing Hannah-sexual happiness and political commitment were one (Gordimer, 1990: 125). Sonny and Hannah are two different characters. Sonny is the political activist and Hannah symbolizes his private life. Sakamoto vouches that both Sonny and Hannah represent this interlocking point of politics and sexuality in the South African context. (Toshiko Sakamoto: [www.ritsumei.ac.jp/.../RitsIILCS](http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/.../RitsIILCS)). Sonny's relationship with Hannah is fruitful. Hannah is a lawyer who releases Sonny whenever he is arrested. Her implication in Sonny's political activities contributes to the liberation of South Africans. Sakamoto who explores *A Sport of Nature* (1987) postulates that:

These transgression in the interracial love affair make a marked contrast to those in *A Sport of Nature* (1987) where the Jewish woman Hillela's involvement in sexual and political relationships with black men becomes a revolutionary drive which leads South Africa to national liberation (Toshiko Sakamoto [www.ritsumei.ac.jp/.../RitsIILCS](http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/.../RitsIILCS))

As opposed to Hillela's contribution, in *A Sport of Nature*, to the liberation of the nation, Sakamoto defends that Sonny and Hannah's relationship is not that fruitful. However, Hannah's efforts to free Sonny from prison should not be underestimated. Sonny's liberation contributes to his commitment, radicalism and charisma. The freedom of a nation is not equated with the liberation of a single activist. Like Hillela, Hannah also contributes to Sonny's successful liberation struggle.

Thanks to Hannah, Sonny displays his virility and masculinity in public in the context of Apartheid. The energy and virility that Sonny develops when he is with Hannah is different from what he feels for Aila. "Poor Aila", as he calls her, informs readers of his disgust for his wife:

He trembled with sorrow and disgust at himself after he withdrew from her body. The caresses were an easy performance. He want to get up out of that bed and house to go to Hannah. ..He judged it was time to approach Aila again- to pretend to want poor Aila, oh my god. The act drained him in shame. Sometimes he felt a final spurt of anger, towards Aila, sperm turned to venom (Gordimer, 1990:69).

## 2.2 Politics and Private Life

Political actions and private life are of paramount importance in Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*. She portrays the triangle love between, Sonny, Aila and Hannah. Apartheid controls, defines and disrupts the lives of black and coloured people. The security police who are the third presence in lovers' privacy (Gordimer, 1990:9-10).

The repression of the whites over blacks sometimes over coloured people shows the hardship of Apartheid in South Africa. The coloured do not identify with blacks because their cultures seem different. Sonny as a coloured does not identify with blacks and certainly not with whites. Due to underground politics, the growing of repression and violence, the coloured people start identifying with blacks. Sonny feels much concerned and joins blacks in the struggle. Sonny declares: *An Injury to One Is an Injury to All* (Gordimer, 1990: 17). The movement brings people together in a culture of resistance. The resistance movement finds political methods and strategies. Sonny becomes the leader of the most famous resistance movement:

His mother had her lover somewhere...Our family is in a completely different scenario. When he left the cosy circle of family for existence under surveillance for prison cell, if he was responsible to the struggle, then the struggle was responsible

for him. Sonny became “Sonny”. He had no existence without it (Gordimer, 1990: 197-199).

He leads political meetings and raises people’s consciousness about their political, social, economic and cultural situations engendered by a repressive system. Sonny’s strategies are very peaceful. He never resorts to violence to achieve his goal. The word goes round that Sonny is too intellectual, Sonny thinks too much Sonny’s style of oratory is getting too predictable...out of date, Sonny’s position on violence isn’t quite in accordance with policy (Gordimer, 1990: 199-200). His speech disturbs and humiliates the white community. His countless arrest does not prevent him from doing his politics:

My father went to prison for them...these aunties and uncles and cousins and kids who live back in the ghetto we come from. I see that my father really loves them...more, he respects them, and he hasn’t left them behind out of any ambition for himself (Gordimer, 1990:134).

Sonny’s sexual desire for Hannah takes precedence over his political activism. Thanks to her, he is released for granting a bail: some weeks after my father was released (Gordimer, 1990: 59). Sonny’s political commitment costs him to gain his students’ confidence. They take to the street to participate in the resistance. The students protest against an inadequate educational system of Apartheid. They hold placards under the effigy of WE DON’T WANT THIS RUBBISH EDUCATION APARTHEID SLAVERY POLICE GET OUT OUR SCHOOL (Gordimer, 1990:25-26).

The white government accuses Sonny of being responsible for the students’ uprising. He is dismissed from his teaching position. He moves from the township to settle in the city. The urban life symbolizes the whites’ presence. Don’t be afraid of white people because being afraid of them means that we do not have the right to live here (Gordimer, 1990:104-105).

As opposed to his friends who hide at night to flee reprisals and repression, Sonny becomes more determined. He puts some students did, they belong to the new generation who learned from blacks..., and the older people from the church and civil rights movements could participate only by smiling solidarity (Gordimer, 1990: 105). White officers place petrol bomb in Sonny’s house to intimidate him. Aila is arrested:

She was moving her head , moving her head calmly at me as she packed her bag, you’d have thought she was about to go on a trip to see Baby and her grandchild. She turned towards me, pleading, modest; Will...I have to get dressed... (Gordimer, 1990: 2006).

Aila is accused of being a member of the Transvaal implementation Machinery that is responsible for acts of terror in the region. She is also accused of attending meeting where mission for placing explosives are planned. As for Baby, she makes many revolutionary acts. She goes to the military camp to have experience in revolution. When Will is convinced that the police are looking for his father but not himself, he stages:

At last, at last: That bastard, that bastard, what has he done now! What has he done to get you inside? I’ll kill him, I tell you when he walks in that kitchen door again I’ll kill him! I went to kill him that night. I was the one who opened the door to the jailers; I was the one who could have died (Gordimer, 1990: 2006-2007).

When Sonny returns from his trip, he notices that the whole house is burnt. He says: “Prison won’t take us out, petrol bomb won’t get out of us. All that don’t stop me”. Apartheid is constantly present and has brought about excruciating situations in the lives of coloured, black and Asian people. After many demonstrations to fight against racial discrimination and political violence during Apartheid, the repressed communities have positive acquirements. Indeed, the old restriction of colour were abolished in most hotels.

### III. Discussion

#### 3.1 Politics and Family Issues

As a political activist, Sonny lives in two separate worlds and then three. Both he and Will repeatedly associate Aila with family matters. They think of Aila only as a beautiful wife and mother. Sonny and Will marginalize her because she does not understand political affairs. Their patriarchal attitude weakens Aila and contributes to her passivity in the resistance. "Poor Aila" is a sentence Sonny uses several times in the novel. Sonny and Aila's marriage is menaced because of Hannah. Sonny adopts the theory of recognizing social education of the community. Parents, relatives, pupils are considered as part of school function. In *My Son's Story*, "political affairs" go hand in hand with "family matters" in the context of Apartheid.

##### a. Father-Son Complicity

There is a silent complicity between Will and his father, Sonny. But, Will hates Sonny when he realizes that he is a liar. He is disappointed by Sonny who is supposed to be his source of inspiration and role model. Sonny meets Hannah in private pretexting that he has a "political meeting". But no such thing ever happens. In the context of Apartheid, being accompanied by a white woman was synonymous with pride. Sonny and Hannah go to the cinema where Will, who is supposed to be at school at such time, surprises them:

My father looked up all around, wanting to know from somewhere—from me, because I was there, I was always at home, her boy, mother's boy, how it happened? When? Where did my mother learn these things? How, without his having noticed it, had she come to kinds of knowledge that were not for her? And what was it she knew whose names she couldn't reveal? What was Aila doing, all these months, without him? (Gordimer, 1990:222).

The meeting between Hannah and Sonny gives rise to Sonny's distance from Aila. Sakamoto underscores: The novel registers a strange distance space emerging around Aila, which distances both male characters and from her. (Toshiko Sakamoto [www.ritsumeai.ac.jp/.../RitsIILCS](http://www.ritsumeai.ac.jp/.../RitsIILCS))

Sonny's unfaithfulness is justified. According to him, he needs Hannah not for his emotional support but rather as a comrade in the struggle. Sonny depicts Aila's passivity and unconsciousness. Her commitment is confined in the workplace and house. Sonny's distance from Aila and his closeness to Hannah strengthen his complicity with Will: "And so there was complicity between us, he drew me into it, as if he were not my father. And yet because he was my father how could I resist, how could I dare refuse him?" (Gordimer, 1990: 27). Will shifts from childhood to adulthood. Thus, he no longer considers himself as a child. He keeps his father's secret not only as his son but also as his accomplice.

Lital Levy addresses Will's transcendence from childhood to adulthood as following: "No longer a child, but not yet an adult, Will is explicitly tasked with adult responsibility as a guardian of his father's secrets; yet this clandestine knowledge immobilizes him, leaving him seething, resentful, and politically passive" (Lital Levy: <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3547>). The secret that Will guards for his father and vice versa is beyond complicity. It is rather Sonny and Will, and father-son secrets. The more complicity between Sonny and Will, the more deceit displays between Will and his mother. Lital Ley quotes Linda Weinhouse: Will's journey towards recognition begins when he 'recognizes' his father's absence and becomes his accomplice in deceiving his beloved mother" (Weinhouse, 1993: 74).

## **b. Love, Deceit and Sexual Passion**

Despite the hardship of racial and social discrimination, love and deceit are very conspicuous in *My Son's Story*. Sonny and Aila show love to each other. Sonny loves Aila to the extent to which he dares not confess it to her. Thanks to Aila's brother, they get married. Sonny stretches on Aila's thighs. He looks at her long hair and her beautiful lips carefully drawn. Sonny likens himself to a cat round a fire to get warmth. In turn, Aila is an obedient and submissive wife. She knows that Hannah is her husband's mistress but she never complains. On a contrary, Aila gives Sonny a good treat. She gives him a cup of coffee, serves him coca cola and milk.

Will is convinced that his father betrays his mother and the whole family. Sonny abandons his wife to have sexual intercourse with Hannah. Since *My Son's Story* brings to light political affairs and family matters. Whenever Sonny betrays Will, he (Sonny) betrays the family, his political agenda and principles. Deceit, lie and betrayal are emanated from Sonny's absence from the house. Liliane Louvel "from Will's perspective, Sonny's betrayal not only his affairs with Hannah but his absence from the family, which leads to the split of the family (Louvel: 1992: 28-33).

Hannah encourages Sonny to find a pretext to be away from home for two days. Sonny finds the alibi that there are urgent meetings at national level somewhere in the country. He arranges these trips so that his family may think that he is with his comrades, and his comrades believe that he has some unavoidable domestic obligations:

...He knew it was against all sense and reason a defiant desire to be seen to belong together. Instead of spending the afternoon making love, they went across the city to a cinema complex in a suburb where neither knew anyone, a suburb of rich white people who never attended protest meeting or knew, had seen in the flesh or blood, anyone had been a political prisoner (Gordimer, 1990: 72-73).

Sonny and Hannah go to Rustenburg to have sexual intercourse. Sonny kisses her cruelly and pushes hard fingers under her clothes. He makes love to her so that she can never forget it: Sonny had no choice, Needing Hannah (Gordimer, 1990:84).

## **IV. Conclusion**

South Africa's writers such as John M. Coetzee and Peter Abrahams portray racial segregation, sexual politics and social injustice in their respective works of fictions *Mine Boy* and *Disgrace*, *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*. In 1990, Nadine Gordimer released *My Son's Story* to castigate racism and political violence in South Africa during Apartheid. Gordimer's fictional work is centred on Sonny, a coloured citizen, gets engaged in blacks' resistance movement against racial discrimination, separate development and social injustice in the context of Apartheid. Sonny succeeds in associating political activities with family affairs, and private passions in his struggle for liberation. His political commitment and private sexual intercourse with Hannah lead him to lose his teaching position and also isolate him from his wife Aila. The narrative turns into Sonny and Will's story and secrets. It begins in a chronological sense with Sonny and Aila's marriage and ends with Will's discovery that his father is having sexual intercourse with Hannah.

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