

# Conflict to Clarity: A Study Of The Evolving Self In Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*

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*"Our lives are connected by a thousand visible threads" – Herman Melville*

Socialization is a dynamic process that helps people develop the ability to think and to grow in ways that are distinctly human. An essential part of the process of becoming a human being lies in the development of a consciousness of self. It provides the base for thought and decisive action. The very conduct of individuals is regulated in terms of the expectations and attitudes of others (Haralambos and Heald 545-46).

Social life is part of every individual and every interaction. An individual cannot mature if he is bred in isolation. Only by observing, learning and assimilating what is in the outside world does one's personality get shaped. This affirms the intrinsic need and value of social interaction. To social psychologists like George Herbert Mead the 'self' is embedded in the social experience and the social processes. The 'self' is not inborn. It is learned during childhood and evolves through the growing years. A child's observation of the world around gives it a consciousness of its 'self.' What it beholds, it reflects in the 'play-stage', to use Mead's terminology. When it comprehends the attitudes of others and responds after assimilating their attitudes its 'self' evolves in full.

The dialectic of the self in Nadine Gordimer's novels has many aspects of the conception advanced by the Symbolic Interactionists like Charles Horton Cooley, G.H. Mead and Robert Ezra Park. The 'self' of the protagonists emerge from a complex process of social interaction. The paper attempts to use the symbolic interaction tradition to examine the evolving self of Rosa Burger in Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*. It details the tale of Rosemarie Burger, daughter of Lionel Burger, an African doctor cum uncompromising revolutionary. Both Lionel and his wife Cathy were involved in the anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa. Lionel's death in prison leaves Rosa Burger alone to explore the complexities involved in what it means to be *Burger's Daughter*. Trying to flee from the psychological influence of her father and his political legacy, Rosa leaves South Africa for Europe. While in France, through her disillusioning affair with Prof. Bernard Chaballier and a bitter encounter with her long lost adopted black brother, Baasie, she gains a new comprehension of and commitment to her life. Though she was the daughter of a communist martyr she had been neutral in the face of evil. In her confrontation with Baasie, the conflict between black consciousness and white radicalism surfaces. Amidst the political conflicts we do find in Rosa the glaring conflict, between "political commitment and private fulfillment" (Petersen 173). At one of the political rallies, Rosa meets Baasie – her black brother who was treated as one of the Burger's family. He tells Rosa that there were blacks who were suffering prison and death in South Africa.

He lashes at her saying that she was in no way different from the other whites who had been oppressing blacks (322).

*Burger's Daughter* depicts the different stages in the growth of Rosa's 'self.' In the early 'play stage' Rosa Burger, daughter of Lionel Burger has her sense of self conditioned by circumstances. Her growing up is interlaced with her identification of her father's qualities viz. courage, conviction, love and selflessness. As a school girl, Rosa waits along with a group of others outside a prison, where her mother has been detained. An onlooker states, "Imagine a school girl, she must have somebody inside" (BD 9). The words indicate that she must have a family member inside the prison. But there is also a hint in them "of Rosa's possessing a developing personality in her own right, behind and within the school girl exterior" (White 214). This is affirmed when Rosa develops real love for Noel de Witt, when she is sent to the jail as his fiancé carrying coded messages from her father. Rosa had grown entirely through other people. As Conrad her lover says to her, "What they told you was appropriate to feel and do" (46).

Rosa begins her narration with the recognition that "one is never talking to oneself always one is addressed to someone ... even dreams are performed before an audience" (16). She is aware of her 'looking-glass self' – a self-image which is indistinguishable from that of her father: "I saw—see—that profile in a hand held mirror directed towards another mirror" (14). She had been brought up in an acutely political atmosphere with her parents spending most part of their lives in jail. Her 'self' which is groomed in an atmosphere of trial, prison visits, political meetings, and personal sacrifices, is made to "realize the need to claim a private life of her own" (Hewson 61).

The 'game stage' of self-scrutiny is initiated in Rosa's relationship with the self-gratifying Conrad. The political ideology of Lionel Burger stands in opposition to the sensual ideology of Conrad. For Conrad, the significant dynamic lies in "the tension between creation and destruction in yourself" (47). Antithetical to his view is Lionel's: "the tension that makes it possible to live lay, for him between self and others" (86). Conrad's reaction to Lionel's death is: "Now you are free" (40). For him, Rosa can only begin to live once she blasphemes her father's ideology.

After her father's death Rosa finds herself in search of both physical and emotional space and in need of "a new point of reference" (38). There were many people interested in Lionel Burger's public life but only Rosa can "make sense of the political and personal dimensions of her parents' lives" (Rowe 47). Driven by an impulse to defect from her father and his liberal ideology, Rosa is drawn into a series of relationships that give room for her private life of individual needs and emotions. Setting aside the demands of the larger human community, Rosa ventures into a phase of self-preoccupation and exploration. She sells her father's house and moves to an apartment to lead a life like somebody else without being restrained by any social responsibility. She does not want to sacrifice her personal life for that of the public.

Rosa's 'sensual self' makes her give up her work in the hospital which is the centre of suffering and pain. She opts instead, to work in a trade journal, one that imports cosmetics and perfume. Her distancing from the harsh realities of life is symbolized by the 'smoked glass window' of the journal office. Her new profession reveals her shift toward a bourgeois lifestyle, which is in opposition to her father's anti-luxury communism. Her acquaintance with Conrad brings her to a kind of sexual awareness. This is magnified in the comparison she makes between herself and her old playmate Clare Terblanche. She finds her body as one "with assurance of embraces" (121) as opposed to Clare's who is "a woman without sexual pride" (123).

Conrad is interested in Rosa only as *Burger's Daughter*, yet, she stays with him in a "condemned cottage" (20) owned by somebody else. It becomes a 'significant symbol' aiding her in exploring her own feelings about her father's house and about her parents. The more Conrad raves against doctrine and all established codes of living the more she understood that Conrad least understood the lives of her parents. Rosa is unable to accept Conrad's worship of the mere physical self. His meaningless existence typified by plans to sail around the world makes Rosa leave "the children's tree house we were living in" (70). She is "continually not only interpreting events or characters ... but also considering the systems through which such events and characters may be and are interpreted" (Martin 17). Eventually she recoils from Conrad's erotic activities which depend upon the replacement of her father.

Soon, Rosa bears witness to the disgusting spectacle of a donkey being mercilessly beaten by a drunk black man, because the animal can no longer pull the cart containing himself, his terrified wife and child. The pain and shock is expressed thus: "Agony that came from some terrible centre seized within the group of donkey, cart driver and people behind him. They made a single object that contracted against itself in the desperation of a hideous final energy" (208). The incident of the donkey is preceded by the agonizing experience Rosa has had in the political party in which Dhaldhla, a black man talks slightly of Lionel Burger's sacrifice to the Black cause. In his speech, Dhaldhla representing the emergent movement of Black consciousness, pushes to the periphery the white political activities. Rosa grows dismayed as he has belittled her father's self-sacrifice. When she finds herself no longer at ease in the political meetings, Rosa decides to secure a passport for herself as a way of escape from her cruel society. The indifference and harshness of society gradually gets epitomized in the donkey scene. Rosa is caught "between her conscience and her desire to live a private life" (Smith 176). She could do nothing to save the donkey and she concludes that she doesn't know "how to live in Lionel's country" (210).

Rosa resolves to leave Africa to flee from all forms of sufferings. In contrast to the heroic personality of her father, her bourgeois life has turned her into a passive recipient of social comforts. Her flight to Paris is another journey of self-fulfilment. There she lives in a village called nice.

Here, she takes shelter in a society in which “her white skin is neither a symbol of a negatively constructed identity nor can it betray her as the settler, foreigner or oppressor” (Wagner 194).

While in Europe, Rosa finds Europeans in a world of parties, sensuality, gossip, luxuries and the like, unlike the struggling Africans back home. Rosa gets acquainted with Katya, her father’s ex-wife. It is inferred that Katya had got divorce from Lionel on account of her own bourgeois tendencies which she developed against Lionel’s communism. Through interaction with Katya, Rosa discovers that Katya had left Lionel because of her preference for her personal life over the public. Her stance is in opposition to Cathy’s (Rosa’s mother) who had sacrificed her own life for the sake of her political activities. Cathy and Katya reflect the two dimensions of Rosa’s self—the public and the private.

Indulgence in the world of sensuality influences Rosa. This is obvious in her changed outlook which is illustrated in an interaction with Michael Pistachi, a friend of Katya. Michael argues for his right to own his father’s inheritance which the Communist party prohibits. Instead of involving herself in that political discussion in defence of her father’s party, she hopes to receive an invitation to his farmhouse-cum-villa.

Rosa’s ‘self’ lost in the world of senses reaches its saturation in the love affair with Bernard Chaballier, a married university professor. He is described as one who lives “among his wife and children ... not with them” (289). This affair bestows on her an identity as “Chaballier’s mistress” (304). She gladly dons this new identity as she firmly believes it is the one she has been in search of. She “fools herself into believing that she can exist outside of time and place” (Halil 40). She imagines that her existence would gain meaning only in association with that of Bernard. She sheds her ‘self’ of the ideological past and with Bernard she lives in “a world of sensual pleasures, divorced from the world of historical events, cut off from both future and past, a world in which she is only a time-less image” (Newman 93).

Socialization not only moulds the individual it also teaches one how to fit one’s unique qualities into the fabric of the society. Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter* shows how the social environment affects Rosa’s awareness of her ‘self’. Like most of Gordimer’s characters Rosa begins her journey of life as an ordinary citizen without any great sense of purpose regarding the social and political situations that surround her. She seems rather simplistic at the outset but the situations she is exposed to and the people she meets with allow her to discover who she really ‘is’. She does not stagnate she moves ahead after a transient state of passivity and disillusionment.

Rosa’s self that had just catered to her sensual needs now becomes more open. Bassie’s call brings her to accept the blacks as they are. His words bring a sea change within her receptive self. She who had fled her father’s ideology, returns to South Africa with a renewed sense of social commitment. This is made possible through the different stages in the development of her ‘self’.

Caught in the luring world of pleasure and forced into a listless relationship with Bernard Chabalier, Rosa's political consciousness is awakened in her final confrontation with Bassie.

She gains cognizance of the fact that she cannot afford to keep away from her political heritage and responsibility. She asks herself, "How could I have come out with the things I did? Where were they hiding" (328). The very state of self-examination depicts her movement towards her 'integrated self.'

Rosa does not sideline her individuality in favour of the public cause. To her, the fact of suffering is more relevant than any ideology, so she reconciles herself to her father's heritage in a unique way. As she says, "I don't know the ideology. / It's about suffering. / How to end suffering" (332). In the acceptance of her 'self', "I am what I always was ... (349), Rosa transcends the conflicts that made her an exile. Her return to South Africa reveals her gaining a "sense of community" (Rowe 53).

Rosa becomes involved in the underground revolutionary work and is detained under Terrorism Act. Diverse experiences lead Rosa to the final stage of maturation. From her youthful, rebellious, passionate self she evolves to be a mature, responsible individualistic woman. Cruising along in an imagined state of living, Rosa is at last anchored in her 'integrated self.' What C. Wright Mills observed in "The Promise" explicates the impact of society on Rosa's self: "Every individual lives out his or her life in a particular society, with the historical circumstances of that society greatly influencing what that individual becomes. People who have been shaped by their society contribute, in turn to the formation of that society and the course of its history" (19).

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