

WHY DOES ROSA GO BACK? SEX, COLOUR  
AND CONFUSION IN NADINE GORDIMER'S  
BURGER'S DAUGHTER

Paper for the 1984 annual conference of the  
African Studies Association of Australia and  
the Pacific. Literature and Politics section.

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The Colombian novelist, Marquez, has said that a writer writes only one book. Nadine Gordimer's book is about white people trying to belong in Africa. This is not an entirely new theme in the fiction that white writers have written in and about Africa, but what makes Gordimer's writing of special interest is her determination to belong in a future South Africa in which white minority rule has come to an end. The roles white people and black people play at present in South Africa are all analysed in her novels from her point of view of the future. By writing in this way, Gordimer is probably doing what she covertly and overtly advocates in her novels: earning her right to belong.

Burger's Daughter is certainly one of her most ambitious novels, for it attempts to evaluate the changing nature of organised, underground opposition to apartheid and white minority rule from the time of the Rivonia trials in 1964 to the uprising of the Soweto school children in 1976. It broaches the question of possible courses of action for one who is disillusioned with the idea that a communist state is automatically a just one. It deals acerbically with the modern, educated, sophisticated Afrikaner nationalist. Rosa Burger, the central character, could have claims to a position in all camps. Her father is from a well-established Afrikaner family, both her parents are communists and political activists with jail sentences to prove their pedigree, her best friend is a black woman who is the wife of an imprisoned black leader and there are heavy hints that, like that of many other Afrikaner families, the Burger blood is not 'pure': we are told about Rosa's dark complexion, her olive skin and her strangely coloured eyes. Rosa even has the offer of a free flat in London. We are given, in Rosa, a character whose identity could be a matter of personal choice and that really is what this book is about. It is about defining the choices and asserting that for the bourgeois with doubts the answer to the question of belonging lies with the individual.

In her main aim, Gordimer does not fail. She certainly covers the choices and is convincing in her criticism. Indeed, her ability to merge political and historical fact with fiction is at its peak in Burger's Daughter, so that, having read an autobiographical book like Hilda Bernstein's The World that was Ours and then having read Burger's Daughter, it is difficult for one to remember whether a particular detail or impression is, so to speak, from the horse's mouth or whether it is the novelist's creation.

This can be seen particularly in the character, Lionel Burger, where Gordimer has skilfully blended elements of the white men accused in the Rivonia Trials - men like Lionel Bernstein and Denis Goldberg and their counsel, Abram Fischer, later himself convicted. The result is a character who is not only tantalisingly 'real' but who embodies the nature of anti-apartheid activity of the 1960s. He is at once an individual and a type. The kind of family-based social life Burger creates around himself, with political involvement at first enriching it and then, on account of police harassment, depleting it, centred around the swimming pool of a comfortable suburban home, with himself as the generous host at Sunday barbecues, is very reminiscent of the life-style that Hilda Bernstein describes in her book.

The main black character, Maris Kgosana, although larger-than-life in the novel, seems to have roots in the real world, too. The most obvious connection to make is with Winnie Mandela. Marisa Kgosana is described as being very beautiful and having a powerful, sexual presence:

I saw the half-bare back of a black woman dressed in splashing colour, which included as overall effect the colour of her skin. The boldest darkest lines of blue and brown, ancient ideogrammatic symbols of fish, bird and conch were extended in the movement of two rounded shoulder-blades from the matt slope of the neck to their perfect centring on the indented line of spine, rippling as shadowless store lighting ran a scale down it. The cloth suggested robes but was in fact cut tight to the proud backside jutting negligently at the angle of the weight-bearing hip, and close to the long legs . . . To touch in women's token embrace against the live, night cheek of Marisa, seeing huge for a second the lake-flash of her eye, the

lilac-pink of her inner lip against translucent-edged teeth, to enter for a moment the invisible magnetic field of the body of a beautiful creature and receive on oneself its imprint - breath misting and fading on a glass pane - this was to immerse in another mode of perception. As near as a woman can get to the transformation of the world a man seeks in the beauty of a woman. Marisa is black; near, then, as well, to the white way of using blackness as a way of perceiving fears, as racialists do. In my father's house, the one was seen as the obverse of the other, two sides of false consciousness . . . But even in that house blackness was a sensuous-redemptive means of perception. Through blackness is revealed the way to the future . . . in the merger of white Cain, black Abel, a new brotherhood of flesh is the way to the final brotherhood. Sex and death, you said. The only reality. I should have been able to explain the element of sensuality that would have qualified the experiences of that house to be considered real by you. I felt it in Marisa's presence, after so long . . . (Burger's Daughter, pp134-5).

This is a central passage in the book and Gordimer is certainly raising more in it than simply the attractiveness of Marisa. To these issues I shall return. The point being made now is that the echoes of a real person to be found in the character Marisa lend that character a persuasiveness and plausibility which mean the reader is prepared to accept the author's generalisations about her. Hilda Bernstein refers to Winnie Mandela in the following way:

Two women attracted the attention of the press photographers, in fact, of all the men: Winnie Mandela, and Barbara, James Kantor's wife. Both strikingly beautiful, it was not merely their features that made heads turn, but a certain quality of bearing: pride, dignity, self-assurance and unfailing elegance in dress. One of Winnie's various bans confined her to Johannesburg and she had to obtain special permission to attend the trial in Pretoria. Whenever she attended court, the police watched her with lustful eyes. (The World that was Ours, p131)

Like Lionel Burger, Marisa Kgosana is at once an individual and a recognisable type. If we accept Marisa and Lionel as types, we understand what Rosa returns to, in emotional terms.

Why she returns is not so clear. It is partly explained by the effect Marisa has on her, compared with the effect Chabalier has on her.

Although Rosa is supposed to admire the equine figure of her French lover, Bernard Chabalier, one feels that she is never quite so moved by him as she is by Marisa, in the previously quoted passage. The novel is divided into first-person accounts of the story by Rosa herself and third-person accounts by an unknown narrator. The sections

dealing with Chabalier are mostly written in the third person, which casts an intended shadow over their accuracy: one is always conscious that the third-person accounts are only an interpretation of the fictional 'facts', (the fiction within the fiction). It is this unknown narrator who tells us that Rosa and Chabalier are committed to each other. Yet in the two short sections in the first person that deal with Chabalier (pp279-80 and 300-1), Rosa seems more fascinated with the effect she has on Chabalier than the other way around, and also with the idea that she is having a fully-fledged love affair rather than posing as a fiancée to some comrade, so that information can be passed in and out of prison. It is understandable that Rosa might find more chance of expressing her passions in the close comradeship of political resistance than in a one-sided relationship with Chabalier.

Another possible interpretation is that Rosa takes up the struggle in this way: having thought through her father's ideas on her own account, accepted some of them, rejected others; having experimented with other ways of living; even having tried to switch her deepest loyalties from the liberation struggle to her French lover, she returns to South Africa. Prince Hal became Henry V.

However, there is still an area of confusion about why Rosa returns. If Gordimer wants us to think that Rosa, for some psychological reason, is deeply attracted to black people per se (which the interaction with Marisa could suggest), why does she not simply allow her heroine to take up with one of the black exiles in London, thereby solving her political and personal needs? The attraction cannot really be a reason for political or even simply national commitment. Indeed, Gordimer is not clear about what Rosa Burger does on her return to South Africa to land her in prison, although through prison she is reunited with Marisa.

The confusion arises because of one's uncertainty about where Rosa

fits in the typology. On one hand she represents the 1970s generation of white resistance to apartheid and she has a marginally different relationship with black resisters to that her father had. Socialist ideas are more widespread and the Communist Party is no longer the only group that has a clearly non-racial policy. At the same time, she is her father's daughter, as the title of the novel emphasises, and can be expected to have a social conscience, much as a missionary's daughter could. Yet Rosa seems to lack her father's zeal and has a fatalistic attitude to change in South Africa. After her return, she says:

I don't know the ideology:

It's about suffering.

How to end suffering.

And it ends in suffering. Yes, it's strange to live in a country where there are still heroes. Like anyone else, I do what I can. I am teaching them to walk again, at Baragwanath Hospital. They put one foot before the other. (Burger's Daughter, p332).

It seems Rosa has inherited Lionel's ability to be a martyr without his belief in structures and organisation. Are we meant to see this as a particularly female weakness? Would Burger's son have thought differently? The bitter irony of Rosa having at first to treat children born crippled and then children made so by police violence in the Soweto uprising, certainly arouses one's sense of outrage. Yet Rosa's service does not seem sufficient, somehow, as a response to the outrage.

Does Rosa in fact also become involved in the underground resistance as well: we are never told. Fats Mxenge, Marisa Kgosana's cousin, delivers a message to Rosa (p343) but the contents are not disclosed. Rosa is arrested for alleged involvement in the Soweto uprising but we are never told whether she was involved or not. All we have is the ironical question, 'Who could believe children could revolt of their own volition?' (p356), which does not really tell us anything about Rosa.

Part of the reason for Rosa's return does seem to lie in her role as a woman. Her models for behaviour are her own mother and her father's first wife, Katya. She seems to reject her own mother by neglect rather than anything else, although she tells us at one point about her mother's ability to size-up a person's usefulness to the cause in one glance and appears somewhat discomfited by this, (p85). Her mother does not seem to affect Rosa much, however. We are told in passing of her mother's death, but it is her father's death that brings about the real change in her life. Of Katya, on the other hand, she becomes genuinely fond and there is a real possibility that she will be able to have a similar sort of life-style to the one Katya has enjoyed with her lover, Ugo Bagnelli, in the South of France. Rosa's lover is slightly more respectable than Ugo, being a teacher, but he too is married. Rosa muses thus:

The prospects: what are the prospects? For Burger's first wife, Ugo Bagnelli's mistress, for Rosa Burger.

You have your nightingales every May . . . The bed Ugo Bagnelli came to when he could get away from his family in Toulon - I sleep in it with Bernard, now - will not be filled with another man of yours . . . today I saw you in the good light that's only to be found in the bathroom, of the dim rooms in this house I wish I could stay in for the rest of my life - I've seen you plucking bristles from your chin.

It's possible to live within the ambit of a person not a country. (Burger's Daughter, p302).

This comes just after an incident in which Rosa was confronted by an old lady in the street, who was momentarily deranged literally by loneliness and simply, desperately, wanted to talk to someone. She drew Rosa into her house and once there became quite normally sociable. The message seems to be that women who decide to live within the ambit of a person not a country face alienation and loneliness as much as any political prisoner, when looked at in absolute terms. Indeed, political prisoners, although separated from each other physically, as they may be, and separated from those outside who have not been caught, are arguably much more part of a community than women whose husbands and lovers have died or left them. For Rosa it is not so much a question

of a future communist utopia but a question of her own future in real terms. When Rosa says that it is not Zwelinzima's nasty phone call that causes her to go back, one can believe her. The phone call simply helps her to see what her needs are.

Yet this still does not quite explain where Rosa fits into the typology. The problems she confronts as a semi-liberated woman could very well be the same problems that her cousin Maria faces, working for the South African Citrus Board in Paris and having become inadvertently involved with a man from a type of Baader-Meinhof gang.

One looks beyond Rosa's femaleness, therefore, for a person or type in the real world from whom Rosa might be drawn and one finds oneself, not surprisingly, looking at the author herself. While Rosa's looks are meant to indicate what Chabalier calls her 'creole' background, they are also remarkably similar to Nadine Gordimer's: olive skinned, slightly built, dark haired; and Rosa's need to return to South Africa (her altercation with Zwelinzima towards the end of the novel indicates that her return is beyond rationality), is much closer to the writer's need (the need of a writer like Gordimer, at any rate, who firmly bases her fiction in the here and now) to be near her sources than it is to the socially conscientious person's need to serve, or the intellectual's need for ideas, or the political activist's need to organise. Seen in this light that first description of Maris Kgosana is as much a declaration by Gordimer of her own motivation for staying in South Africa - a subliminal response to a sensuous world which, however difficult to explain, feeds her imagination - as it is an attempt to explain her character's upbringing.

On the one hand there is the immediate response of the adult Rosa to a physical contact - and Gordimer here seems to be deliberately breaking taboos; both of racialists and white liberals who would rather not think about physical differences, by trying to accurately describe her own reactions to a black person she finds attractive. On

the other hand is Rosa's childhood experience, which is probably common to most white children, even of racist families, of positive sensuous and emotional contact with black people. But in Rosa's case, which would not be the case with children from racist families, the contact is seen as a way out of being 'white' altogether. It seems that this is the way out of marginality for white people - to merge with black culture and to ultimately lose their 'whiteness'. As a writer what Gordimer must believe is that she is part of the birth of a new culture rather than the cataloguer of a dying one. (She has called herself a 'white African'). To the writer it would not matter what Rosa did politically on her return. (It has happened that people have been found guilty by association in the past in political cases). It would matter that she associated with the bearers of the new culture, embodied in Maris Kgosana, with her generous, uncrushable spirit.

References:

- Gordimer, Nadine. Burger's Daughter. Jonathan Cape, 1979.
- Bernstein, Hilda. The World that was Ours. Heinemann, 1967.