

## The Internal Landscape of My Mysterious Body: *Burger's Daughter* in the Mirror of Lacanian Psychoanalysis

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### Abstract

*In the novel Burger's Daughter, Nadine Gordimer's (1923 -2014) treatment of Rosa after her return to her country-a character who repudiates the Law of the father- is an account in which the phallogocentric ideology and desire reenact the tenets of Lacanian theory. In order to proclaim her autonomy Rosa can revolt only against another insurgent because her father is a political activist and fights for freedom in a strictly racist ideology. In their home children have few rights to express themselves. In such a complicated situation Rosa is able to reach her subjectivity only when she gains a boyfriend, and stays away from her father's ideology. Her parents are blind to the fact that her role as a partner denies the reality of her emotions. All in all, Rosa who is introduced as "Little Rosa Burger" at the beginning of the novel becomes once again a child at the final section of the novel. She lives a destiny which has been prepared for her. In the novel women either white or black who want to get beyond the bounds of the Law are trapped; their belief in the ideology leads them to shun or annihilate anything that might endanger that ideology, leaving them no way out. Rosa runs up against the boundaries of a white male hegemony, underscoring her inability to find any space outside the ideology that defines her. The aim of this paper is to see in what ways Rosa is the embodiment of the psyche of her society. It focuses on the ways in which Rosa negotiates subjectivity. Where she internalize the law-of-the-Father, and when she rejects her imposed identity.*

**Keywords:** Law of the Father, Subjectivity, selfhood, phallogocentric ideology.

### 1. Introduction

A fractured personality is the dominant theme in the first chapter of Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*. Nevertheless, there are some differences between Rosa, a person introduced as Mr. Burger's daughter, and Rosa Burger in the third part. If the Law of the father forces her to negotiate the recognition-presence of the paternal authority, along with repression of desire-then acquiring passport, familiarity with Conrad, and escaping to Europe enables Rosa to understand herself in relation to society. In course of time she feels a pervading sense of Lack and absence. She realizes that living in Europe does not respond to her every need and quest. This traumatizes her narcissistic illusion. Her coming to terms with father's ideology is significant because it causes her to assume to the symbolic register of language that is the law of the father. However, before attempting this line of discussion, that is a Lacanian exegesis, I would like to consider some of major critical readings of the novel.

Critics have presented different analysis for Rosa's personality. Karen Hallil (1994) scrutinizes Rosa's search for selfhood. Such a challenging search for Rosa is "to understand her body's paradoxical relationship to discourse" (Hallil, 1994, p. 31). Hallil believes Rosa has a multiple positioned personality. Rosa finds her way to the subjectivity only in the latter part of the novel when she assimilates with the ideology.

*Her journey is an arduous one, for she must establish her textual flexibility not only between the oppositions of personal and political discourses, but also between the complex network of political discourses which construct her. As an Afrikaner woman she must explore race and gender; she must travel the world "round as a navel" to learn to be at "home" in her body as a private woman and to find her "home" as a political subject in South Africa. (Hallil, 1994, p. 32)*

Another critic Thomas Knipp (1993) also acquires a psychoanalytic approach in his paper, "Going All The Way: Eros and Polis in the Novels of Nadine Gordimer." He brings into focus family relationship within a historically turbulent period. The novel has been analyzed in the mirror of Frederic Jameson's notion of sociopolitical ideology. Characters lives were analyzed in details and in connection with the impacts of the social and political superstructures. How these characters act and interact in their fictional role in a fabricated time that is accessible to them only in their fictional world.

The novel's structure and its interplay have been considered in Susan Barrett's (2004) "What I say will not be Understood": Intertextuality as a Subversive Force in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*. Susan discusses the usage of quotation in the novel and discusses this technique with reference to Genette's ideas about intertextuality. Barrett believes,

*In Gordimer's case, the aim of the novel is to arouse people's consciousness and being aware of the origins of the hypotexts is of little importance. When Burger's Daughter was published, none of the works quoted could be obtained legally within South Africa. (Barrett, 2004, p. 116)*

In Barrette's view point Gordimer made use of intertextuality for promulgating of ideas and interrogating the prevailed ideology. Gordimer has voiced blacks in a brilliant way in a time when whites were speaking in their place. "In *Burger's Daughter* Gordimer solves this problem in a unique way by withdrawing completely and allowing blacks to speak in their own voice." Stephen Clingman (1986) in *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* pays attention to Gordimer's usage of history in her novels. In a chapter entitled *The Subject of Revolution: Burger's Daughter and July's People*, Stephen discusses Gordimer's close monitoring of present and the past.

*Not only has she made direct use of basic political and historical texts ... but she also undertook interviews with people connected with Fischer and his times. So the figure of Burger acts as a bridge in the novel between fact and fiction, and past and present, as the methods of the novelist and a more orthodox historian coincide. (Clingman, 1986, p. 172)*

It is impossible to comment on all the multifarious readings of *The Burger's Daughter*. However, it is interesting to bear in mind that thirty five years after its publication, the novel keeps on to attract critics of different schools of thought.

This paper is one of very few studies which have investigated the novel by providing a Lacanian reading. Rosa Burger's struggle for self definition raises some fundamental questions: How she passes the crucial mirror stage to assume the gender? And how her experiences exemplify Lacan's understanding of subjectivity? However, before proceeding with a Lacanian reading of *Burger's Daughter*, a reading which resolves the above questions, it is useful to summarize Lacan's views in this regard.

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) in his magnum opus *Ecrits* remarks unconscious is "the discourse of the Other" (Lacan, 1977, p. 285). From Lacan's view point this Other stems from the symbolic presence of paternal authority that is responsible for the repression of desire. This Other,

*in each of its incarnations it is that which introduces 'lack' and 'gap' into the operations of the subject and which, in doing so, incapacitates the subject for selfhood, or inwardness, or apperception, of plenitude; it guarantees the indestructibility of desire by keeping the goal of desire in perpetual flight. (Sturrock, 1979, p. 134)*

In Lacanian psychoanalysis subject's lack of being also results from his dependence to the Other. As such Malcolm Bowie remarks, "the human subject is divided; the unconscious has a linguistic structure; the subject is inhabited by the Other" (Bowie, 1991, p. 82). It is necessary to say that this Other cannot be necessarily the father. Lots of other significant ideal can play the role of the Other. "A father, a place, a point, any dialectical partner, a horizon within the subject, a horizon beyond the subject, the unconscious, language, the signifier" (Bowie, 1987, p. 119). As a matter of fact subject's dependence to the other is a sort of subverting the authority from the I to the Other. Such subversion originates during the crucial mirror stage. In this period, the sense of wholeness that generally child receives is illusory. The infant looks in the mirror and confuses his own image with reality. In his or her search for the supporting image behind the mirror child negotiates the subjectivity. The child learns that mother does not respond to its every need. This recognition shatters his illusion. In this significant moment of his life the father enters into the realm of acquiring of subjectivity. His entrance is considered significant for the reason that it impels the subject to assume the Symbolic register of the law of the father.

This important stage is called castration that in Lacanian psychology has nothing to do with the biological definition. The moment in which father shatters child's illusory dyad with the mother is symbolized with the term phallus. The phallus resembles the name of the father which mediates the law. In this crucial moment Jonathan S. Lee (1990) believes, "language is acquired, the fact that children do grow up in a world richly structured by various symbolic (and castrating) systems" (Lee, 1990, p. 174). This concept is of great significance because of its symbolic function not its physical one. It functions for both sexes while residing in symbolic order. Lacanian subject is deprived of the phallus and for this reason his/ her desire can never be fulfilled. The phallus is not only the representative of the name of the father but also an indication of lack. Lacan focuses on the subject in society and its relation to language. That is why the unconscious in Lacanian view is, "discourse of the Other". Here he is hinting that the "I" that thinks cannot be presumed to be the subject who knows every utterance it speaks.

*This form would have to be called the Ideal-I, if we wished to incorporate it into our usual register, in the sense that it will also be the source of secondary identifications, under which term I would place the functions of libidinal normalization. (Lacan, 1977, p. 2)*

*Burger's Daughter* is the result of its political circumstances. In this paper it is approached through Lacanian principles. The novel represents significant functions like mirror stage and the real as well as a character whose

experiences exemplify Lacanian subjectivity. The reader is informed about a critical moment in the history of South African people's fight for subjectivity. It narrates a cultural resistance. The novel grows from The Soweto Revolt in which the role of school children is very important. Rosa's relation with her father also is formed in between. Anyway it seems that new circumstances are needed for the growth of new ideology. In the light of fight for political self definition we can trace Rosa's struggle for subjectivity.

## 2. Discussion

Rosa Burger's story, in Lacanian terms, is the most principal of those represented in the subject consciousness of *The Burger's Daughter*. It is possible to follow her passage from infancy through the crucial mirror stage, to the action of assuming of gender. This process also goes beyond the resolution of the Oedipus complex in her interjection of the Name-of-the-Father. Each of these steps clarifies the Lacanian constitution of subjectivity. It is mostly for the reason that Rosa experiences the world which Lacan exemplifies. These images are the mother, the objects which symbolize the Other, and Other's presence in the Name-of-the-Father. In her struggle for self-scrutiny we can follow the constitution of her personality as a normative subject. Her passage through the mirror stage and her acceptance of the father are significant for the analysis of this paper. Her endeavor for reconstituting the subjectivity by comparing her present and the legacy of the past is accomplished through the interactions of Rosa and three other characters. It is conveyed through the interactions between Rosa from one side and Conrad, Katya, and Lionel Burger from the other side. Each of these characters is considered important in protagonist progress towards subjectivity. Conrad plays the role of a surrogate brother: Katya as a mother and Lionel is the father to whom she finally cedes.

Rosa's entrance into the cultural dominance of the-law-of-the-father is simultaneous with her awareness of the change in body. In this way racism is understood as a result of sexual repression. Gordimer in this novel is concerned with the idea of a quest. In the overall atmosphere of the novel it is about the quest of people for social emancipation from a racist ideology and on the personal level it is about the Rosa's quest for encountering the real. Even a cursory look at the title of the novel justifies that Rosa has not been given an identity. She is called Burger's daughter. As such it shows her dependency to the-Name-of-the-Father. This title immediately brings to the mind Lacanian conception in the exact sense of the word that the father is the principle of the law, and acceptance of the name-of-the-father is to accept subordination to an order which is grounded in society. We are introduced to the protagonist along with the ideology which she inherits from her father. She rejects the same in the favor of her personal subjectivity and finally she comes to terms with the inheritance. This can be seen as a self probation process.

In the novel Rosa repudiates her dependence on the father in order to enter in a world of fantasy. She does this because of her own ambivalence towards her body. Her personality is formed through the constant reference to her own body. Awareness of her gender is in close connection with her physical and social changes. In the novel Rosa remarks,

*But real awareness is all focused in the lower part of my pelvis, in the leaden, dragging, wringing pain there. Can anyone describe the forces in the menstruation of early puberty? The bleeding began just after my father had the internal landscape of my body turns me inside out in that public place on that public physically I had one (Gordimer, 1979, p. 16).*

It shows that her entrance into the realm of imaginary happens with delay. Due to the loss of her mother she finds an image of bodily unity in Marisa Kgosana. I should say for Rosa, the process of constitution of subjectivity is shown in two stages: first with Rosa's loss of her imposed subjectivity as a result of her father's death in prison, and, second, her acquaintance with Conrad. It is in this step that she learns to care for her personal life. She takes distance from her father's ideological aims. The impact of Dhladhla's ideas persuades her to provide a passport for departure to a new land. Rosa's entrance to France can be taken as a way into the realm of the real. Rosa's visits of Marisa Kgosana clearly portrayed as a step through the mirror stage.

*Burger's Daughter* foregrounds issues of female identity. Pramod K. Nayar (2013) believes, "One should not immediately assume that such writing ignores social and political problems in favour psychological explorations of the 'women condition'" (p. 118). Gordimer's strategy is to single out a white woman who attempts to achieve autonomy by emerging from her father's dominance. Characterization of Rosa is complex because we can see her in different angles such as her position in the society in terms of sex, class struggle, and race. In terms of sex she has been desexualized and infantilized. She is kept in the image of a dedicated daughter for the reason that she is depicted as, "giving loving support" to her father. In order to feel sense of subject hood she is permitted to have boyfriend. Then her father ridicules them for "not knowing she was not for them." Her father is happy of indulging her in a surrogate relationship and role but they are unaware of damaging her sense of self hood. As a matter of fact they are repudiating her emotions and sense of

individuality and she remains inactive in her quest of subjectivity.

*Didn't you understand that everything that child, that girl [Rosa] did was out of what is between daughter and mother, daughter and brother, daughter and father. When I was passive, in that cottage, if you had known – I was struggling with a monstrous resentment against the claim – not of the communist party! – of blood, shared genes, the semen from which I had issued and the body in which I had grown. (Gordimer, 1979, p. 62)*

Rosa is incapacitated because of the law expressed within the symbolic. Her desire is also shaped by the same law. In reality Lionel is backing up the structure of the law within the symbolic. Since desire is Rosa's primary motivation, then to control her desire is in fact to control Rosa and curbing her quest. Law which has been maintained by Lionel is part of the prevailed ideology. In turn Rosa is shaped by ideology. The dominant ideology in *Burger's Daughter* is phallos-centric and can be detected to the exploitative ideology of a racist regime. In this novel the Name-of-the-Father from which Lionel is controlling his daughter shows the power behind the structure. Rosa tries to reject the legacy of her parents but she is unable to escape the reality of her own society.

*What would you do if you were me? What is to be done? ... Lionel – my mother and father – and the people in that house, had a connection with blacks that was completely personal. ... I have lost the connection. It's the memory of childhood warmth for me. (Gordimer, 1979, p. 172)*

In *Burger's Daughter*, the Name of the Father is equivalent with the name of Lionel Burger. Lionel is an encouraging name for many people in the novel. His name shapes and influence lives of many others such as Rosa, Bassie, Conrad, Katya, the Swedish journalist, and Chaballier. Lionel is a hero in the eyes of many. These characters either admire him or doubted his opinions in particular by Rosa and Bassie. Rosa tells about the father,

*I'm told even people who have no religious beliefs sometimes have the experience of being strongly aware of the dead person. An absence fills again-that sums up how they describe it. It has never happened to me, with you; perhaps one needs to be in the close surroundings where one expects to find that person anyway-and our house was sold long ago. I didn't ask them for your ashes, contrary to the apocryphal story the faithful put around and I don't deny, that these were refused me. After all, you were also a doctor, and to sweep together a handful of potash . . . futile relic of the human body you regarded as such a superb example of functionalism. (Gordimer, 1979, p. 328)*

Lionel emerges as a possible threat to the racist system but he remains a threat to Rosa's subjectivity as well. As a matter of fact, confusion about identity caused by her parents suffocates her, obstructing her growth. That's the reason why Rosa tries to shake off the burdens of traumatic experiences by departure to France. As a Lacanian would say the father is the principle of the law, the language system, and acceptance of the name-of-the-father is to accept subordination to an order which is grounded in society.

In Lacanian principle, the normative subject is supposed to come at last under the authority of the symbolic father who is the inaugurating agent of law in the Oedipal passage. In this context, the "Name-of-the-Father," says Malcolm Bowie (1991), "was the symbol of an authority at once legislative and punitive. It represented, within the Symbolic that which made the Symbolic possible-all those agencies that placed enduring restrictions on the infant's desire and threatened to punish, by castration, infringements of the law" (Bowie, 1991, p. 108). It is argued by Lacan that as the subject is subjugated to language, she or he is inserted into a Symbolic order. Without this insertion, the two levels of signification are not co-present, and the subject may suffer from psychosis. Conscious and unconscious discourses are asymmetrical but co-present because points of contact exist between the two, *points de cushion*, paternal signifiers.

Rosa as his daughter has to deal with this ideology. For the purpose of asserting her independence she has to resist the ideology. Since Lionel himself is also an insurgent Rosa has to fight with another fighter. Lionel expects Rosa to take her mother's role in household. As a young woman she is able to highlight her role in life only when she acquires a boyfriend. It means if she is intended to sway away from her father's name she has to come under the shadow of Noel de Witt. It is only through this she can have her parents approval. This role again denies her subjectivity. During her course of life she has not change at all. She is still Burger's daughter. The idea of prison in the novel juxtaposes with Rosa's psyche. It gives us access to the depth of her inner life. It shows that Rosa abandons her father in her revolt against the law of the father by her departure to France but unable to satisfy her inner voice returns to country to be once again Burger's daughter.

The moments Rosa spend with Clare Terblanche and her parents Dick and Ivy to receive their welcome and recognition clarifies this idea further, "In the enveloping acceptance of Ivy's motherly arms-she feels as if I were her own child-there is expectance, even authority. To her warm breast one could come home again and do as you said I would, go to prison" (Gordimer, 1979, p. 39). Clare has the same psychic condition as Rosa. Both suffer from being repudiated subjectivity. They have been ignored in the shadow of parent's resistance for their cause. Clare is depicted, "as a body

that had no signals and a woman without sexual pride" (Gordimer, p. 45). In this condition once again Rosa tries to signify by not conforming to the parents, "Other people break away. They live completely different lives. Parents and children don't understand each other... not us. We live as they lived." (Gordimer, p. 56)

In her attempts to escape from the name of the father she seeks refuge to other male characters generally are named as "brothers" such as Brandt Vermeulenn and Conrad and Baasie. For a time she resides with Conrad during which she experiences a private erotic world in which no one is permitted to interfere, "We had in common such terrible secrets in the tin house: you can fuck your mother and wish your father dead" (Gordimer, p. 145). By the death of her father Rosa is given sexual freedom. "I know I must have wished him to die." It is possible for Rosa to encounter the real only after a lapse of some years. Although in Europe she is on the verge of acquiring personal fulfillment she has never had but the real stage for Rosa is coming into terms with South African Political climate. She describes this stage as such,

*Can anyone describe the peculiar fierce concentration of the body's forces in the menstruation of early puberty? The bleeding began just after my father had made me go back to bed after my mother had been taken ... I am within that monthly crisis of destruction, the purging, tearing, draining of my own structure. I am my womb, and a year ago I wasn't aware – physically – I had one. (Gordimer, pp. 15-16)*

In the first part of the novel we are introduced to a Rosa who has her revolutionary inheritance. In the second part Rosa repudiates this inheritance in favor of personal subjectivity but in the third part she re-unites with the law and the same inheritance. So, it is Lionel's name and desire that shapes their identity. He is the primal father and responsible in repudiating Rosa's subjectivity but he inherits this from his father as well. So when Rosa is introduced to us as Burger's daughter it means the law of repudiating Rosa's subjectivity is the law of race and gender.

### 3. Conclusion

In the novel Rosa has been called by different names in crucial situations. From the title that clearly identifies Rosa with her father's name to other characters' indications as such at the outset she is depicted as a "school girl" (Gordimer, p. 9); from an onlooker's view point as a lady of "remarkable maturity" (p. 11) and in Liscio's view point she is "her mother's daughter" (p. 249). This shows that Rosa initially perceives herself to be in a state of seamless unity with her father. As a whole, this impression has been fostered by the law of the father. Only later on while residing in France she comes to recognize the name of the father. It shows that she never grasps hold of the reality and her real identity for the reason that Lionel backs up the structure of the law within the symbolic and curbs Rosa's desire. The law that is maintained by Lionel is part of prevailed ideology.

Rosa's return to her country is in point of fact her encountering with the real. In this stage although Rosa has been given a chance to become a subject but she is controlled through the law. In Slavoj Žižek's terms, this ideology is "a kind of reality whose very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants – if we come to 'know too much,' to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself" (Žižek, 1989, p. 21). Rosa can be taken as the embodiment of the psyche of her society that runs up against the boundaries of a white male hegemony, underscoring her inability to find any space outside the ideology that defines her.

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