

Complexities of identity: A study of Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*

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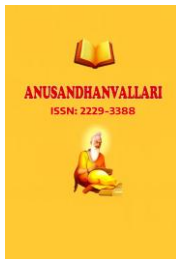
Abstract The research article explores the intersectionality and post-apartheid identity crisis. Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* perceives the conception of intersectionality as a widespread structure for understanding the convolution of social identities and the dynamics of power. It argues that the experiences of discrimination and oppression are designed by the junctures of various social classifications such as race, gender, class and sexuality. Based on this speculative context, the enquiry delves into the complex identities of the characters in the novel. Through the narrative perspective it unveils the endless struggles for liberation, the multiracial tradition, marginalisation and gender inequality in the socio-political background of apartheid-era of South Africa. The research paper provides a refined interpretation of the crux of intersectional discrimination experienced by people.

Keywords: Intersectionality, marginalisation, gender, race, sexuality, social identity, power dynamics

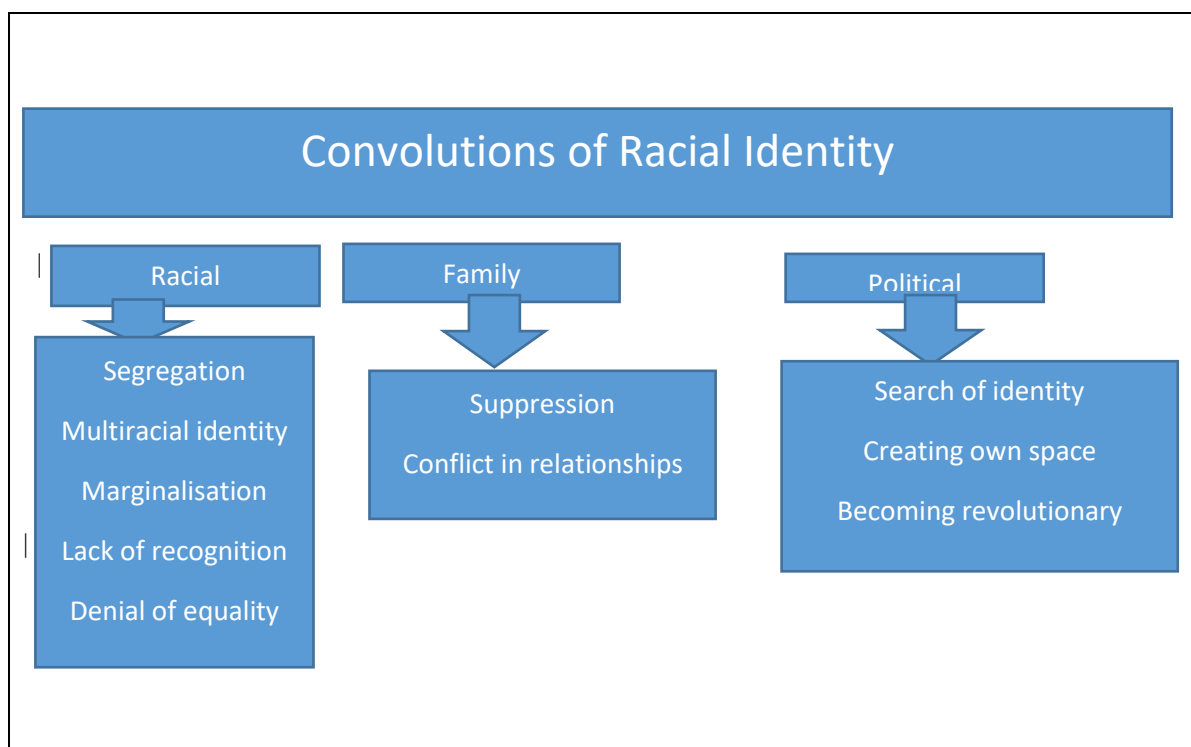
Introduction

Nadine Gordimer was a pioneer of the apartheid-era of South Africa. Her novels are categorised by their deep estimation of human interactions, social inequalities, and the convolutions of life in a racially biased society. Through her strong narrative perspectives, she unveils the difficulties of social conflicts and revolutions of the period. The exploration of identity remains dominant and persuasive, integrating the crisis of race and class. It has to be examined and disclosed by approving intersectional confrontation, where the varied and traversing identities of individuals coincide and socialise. Gordimer's work is often an exploration of the human experience under oppressive regimes. Her stories often center on individuals grappling with the turmoil of apartheid, shedding light on their challenges, ethical difficulties, and the enduring effects of institutionalised racism. Through her well-developed characters and intricate plots, Gordimer delves into the nuances of identity, authority, and opposition. It offers a profound commentary on the moral and emotional toll of existing in a fractured society. Her literature not only criticized the apartheid system but also contemplated the obstacles of reconciliation and healing in post-apartheid South Africa. In Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*, the element of intersectionality is profoundly rooted. It enlightens the diverse association of race, class, gender, sexuality and politics. The apartheid era in South Africa represents a crucial period notable for its established racial segregation and discrimination. As a system it maintains the supremacy and sovereignty of the white minority. It pedantically oppressed and marginalised the blacks and other non-whites in the country, "the Africans-speaking and the English-speaking" (Gordimer, 10). The so-called "apart-hood" stimulated strategies to isolate the black majority both physically and socially, "There's no freedom in working for freedom" (Gordimer, 66) And, thereby it entangles the freedom of the blacks by delimiting where individuals might live, labour, obtain education, and interact socially based on their racial collation.

The notion of intersectionality is crucial for understanding how various social identities intersect to create different experiences of oppression and liberation. Kimberle Crenshaw, a social theorist is associated with Critical Race theory, has coined the term intersectionality. She argues that every person's identity is multi-dimensional. "Multidimensional identities reflect how race, gender, and other social categories interact to produce distinct forms of discrimination and privilege, making it essential to address these dimensions in any comprehensive analysis of

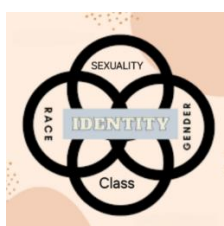


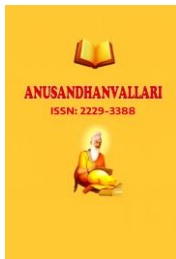
social inequality." (Crenshaw, 20). Discrimination is not merely based on gender, it is a mix of race, gender, class and sexuality that intersect with one another. This intersection results in diverse forms of discrimination and subjugation. Individuals from different backgrounds perceive the world in unique ways, with an African American man's view divergent to that of an African American woman. This affects the social role and the existence in the society. It helps us to understand the dynamics of power and the factors that impact our identity and experience in society. The discerning effects of racial segregation highlight the intricacy of discrimination faced by marginalized societies. "Without intersectionality, we are left with a fragmented understanding of social inequality, one that fails to capture the complexity of how different forms of oppression interrelate." (Crenshaw, 20). It causes multidimensional impediments for individuals who experience different forms of oppression based on race, gender and socio economic factors. The apartness inhibits their social alertness and extends poverty within marginalized people. It derails the exemplification and involvement in politics. The denial of voting rights further disregards their progress towards social justice and equality. The intersectionality of these tolerances emphasise the inevitability to empower marginalized communities through different magnitudes of identity. "The identity black people long for is to be recognised as being equal human (Fanon 11)". This idea postulates the blacks to treatment of being 'other'. According to decolonial theories of Crenshaw, racism is the subjugation of colonized communities rather than individuals. Racism is a systemic problem. "equality became a cry that couldn't be made out" (Gordimer, 16) It is ingrained in the political, social, cultural, and economic institutions that work together to uphold the racial oppressive system. Although the individual encounters a small portion of the system, institutional racism seems endless. Considering the idea of mental enslavement in the colonized, it is present in their thoughts, dispositions, abilities, and knowledge. It extends well beyond their personal experience by revolutionising the thoughts of freedom and equality. The novel *My son's story* deals with a 'coloured' family. The protagonist is rooted in a mixed race, as his father is a white and his mother is a black. It throws light on the struggle between the superior and the inferior class. The racial shrewdness and colour prejudice are prominent in the characters. Here, the representation of 'coloured' as a racial ordering becomes significant. Its uncertainty and flexibility as a racial classification recommends the possibility of revolution in the racial order. It pervades all personal, gender and sexual associations in South Africa.



Multiracial Identities

Multiracial identity is difficult to comprehend. This is particularly where the dominant White group has battled to create and uphold a distinct colour line for the purpose of defending the oppression of people of color throughout history. The story begins with Will, who is the son of Sonny. The people of colour experience a sense of displacement because they do not truly fit into either the black or white community. Sonny, the main character in the novel, has constantly been portrayed with a strong desire for freedom. His family takes pride in him being the sole educated member. He has to deal with challenges and difficulties due to apartheid laws. Sonny's struggles have been portrayed as a vital part of the political oppositions. It reveals their position between two cultures and lack of roots in South African society. As an ordinary teacher, he lacks enthusiasm for the predicament of the black population. He is eager to have complete knowledge about these social matters. Displacement is a vibrant issue in the realm of postcolonial literature for its vast range of consequences on the post-colonial human psyche and their societies. Although the postcolonial subjects are struggling to deal with this displacement in reality, it also provides advantages to elevate the position. Displacement occurs into two stages. One is physical and another is psychological. Sonny's family faces a physical displacement in the process of segregation. The people are segregated in terms of their entry in to the liquor store, the cinemas, to throw trash on the road and to use toilets. Even they don't have liberty to enter in to the municipal library. The irony of racism is represented by the motto above the pillared entrance of the library, "Carpe Diem" (7).





My Son's Story, expresses the challenging forces of multiracial individuality. "Not defined—and it was this lack of definition in itself that was never to be questioned, but observed like a taboo, something which no-one, while following, ever could admit to". (Gordimer, 21-22). The boy's description articulates his deep realization of multiracial identity as an inner conflict between white and black origin. It demonstrates the uncertain circumstance of biracial people in the country. This strange state of the 'coloured' family, who are privileged yet separated from the prospects appreciated by whites, creates a particular impression on their distinct experiences and racial awareness. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon argues that the colonial subject is fabricated by the coloniser, and in turn, the colonial subject assimilates the culture of the coloniser.

The dominance of white power oppresses the lives of the blacks and coloureds. The biracial people do not have any identity, they are neither black nor white. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), asserts that the colonizer shapes the identity of the colonial subject through cultural and psychological dominance. This process of assimilation has deep psychological impacts, causing self-loathing and internal conflict. Fanon stresses the importance of challenging this imposed identity to reclaim their culture and achieve true decolonization, resisting the cultural and psychological control of the colonizer. Due to secretive politics and the growing of suppression and brutality, the biracial individuals adopt a shared identity with blacks. And this newly constructed identity, allows Sonny to have much concern for the blacks. He proved the harmony of his community and the responsibility of educating the children. "He took responsibility for keeping stones out of their hands" (17). He stood as a mediator between the students and the police. The black solidarity creates a principle of communal opposition.

The sense of belongingness is positioned between the black in the ghettos and the whites in the cities. "We don't accept their segregation, we've had enough of telling them, we're showing them—" (27). He has the ability to involve with both groups. But, the alliance is divergent because of the inequalities due to the separation within the mixed-race community. Sonny detaches himself from social events as well as political events. As Homi K Bhabha says "Words will not speak and the silence freezes into the images of the apartheid" (Location of culture, 45) His ideas of hybridity focuses on how individuals experience colonialism. Deepening in the idea, Sonny's hybrid identity intersect with race and he keeps away himself from the liberation movements.

Gordimer's *My Son's Story* delineates the complexities of racial identity. The power play of race, gender and sexuality are involved in power dynamics and family limitations. Bhabha also discusses impersonation, which involves the colonial subject imitating the coloniser, leading to a complex relationship of ambivalence. As a man of colored race he is suppressed and deviates himself from the responsibility as a husband and father in the family. He searches for his identity among the colonisers. Though a role model and a source of inspiration for many people in his society, he is not able to keep up his standards. And ultimately he finds a relationship which would get along with his revolutionary thinking. "In this freak displacement, the biological drive of his life, which belonged to his wife and the children he'd begotten, was diverted to his lover" (Gordimer, 241-42).

During the apartheid regime, imprisonment of blacks and coloureds were common. People felt satisfied and committed themselves to the task of fighting for liberation in the prison. But the banishment from the society and family serves as a facilitator for prisoners to seek provision and livelihood from human rights organizations. The concept of imprisonment intersects with the changing gender perspectives, mostly in the depiction of relationships and power mechanics within families. It creates a sense of isolation. Being away from the family and the power of race sharpens the need to be consoled and empathised.

Critical Perspectives

Sexuality is entangled with broader themes of identity, politics, and social dynamics. It is a significant dynamism of identity. Sonny's sexuality is expressed in his affair clandestine relationship with Hannah Plowman. He fell in love with her because of their collective political struggles and philosophy. He feels happy and comfortable in the



presence of Hannah. His identification of his identity as a white made his intentions of getting sexual satisfaction is more effortlessly achieved. Hannah becomes the only friend whom he searches for fulfil his suppressed desires of love and sex. "Needing Hannah" is a never ending representation of dominant identity.

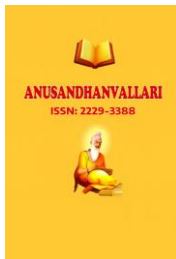
At the same time he causes pain and suffering to his own family. His daughter, Baby cuts her wrists when she came to know his illicit relationship. He fails to stop her from the revolutionary tactics. Aila, on the other hand, isolates herself a passive observer. Will stood between his father and mother to keep the affair hidden. This interracial affiliation is the outcomes of Sonny's dilemmatic existence of being white and black. It intersects and gets him to be marginalised and terminated from the movement which celebrates his participation and family which respects his presence and thoughts. A sense of realisation occurs when he stands all alone with his son.

Gender inequality plays a pivotal role in generating marginality in a racially prejudice society. It is a sociological factor, which is constructed solely by the society. Women in this context are suppressed and the traditional roles are designed by the patriarchal society. Concentrating on the experiences of black women in cases of domestic violence and rape, Kimberle argues that black women face distinctive and increased forms of discrimination. "She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression." (Crenshaw, 47-48). They did not face displacement, intolerance, or violence because of their race or sex, but because of the intersections of both race and sex. She elucidates that this does not mean that their experience was a collective of racial and gender based discrimination but was exceptional.

The white women are educated, they have their identity and they are capable of having liberation, owning education and a well-defined identity, often embrace revolutionary ideologies. In contrast, black women face a dual marginalisation, being marginalized due to their gender and their race. "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism"(Crenshaw). The intersection of black women's identity with their race and socioeconomic class intensifies economic disparities. The lack of access to education and economic stability serves as an essential element in the subjugation of women. In a male-dominated society, women are intentionally denied education to impede their representation in politics. The society's actions have suppressed the spirit of women, exploiting them for its selfish motives.

In *My Son's Story*, Aila is portrayed as an amazingly beautiful and genuinely dedicated Indian woman who holds the title of Sonny's wife. Her character shows her strength and balanced submission to her husband, symbolising the spirit of a faithful and respectful wife. Regardless of her charm and loving appearance, Aila is not simply a passive character. She is portrayed as an active participant in society. With a strong obligation to live a purposeful life, she has cultured independence through education, empowering her to involve vigorously in various community enterprises. Aila's involvement in revered organizations like the Rotary club and Lions club stresses her commitment to societal welfare. Through collective efforts and support from these groups, she has successfully established a crèche to make a progressive effect and create evocative chances for others.

Crenshaw asserts that engaging an intersectional perception to understand black women's experiences would brighten the collaboration of race and gender. It allows a deeper and widespread understanding on the dynamics of power in society. The intersectionality of race and gender have infused Aila's conversion into a revolutionary power. Regardless of her husband's dishonest affair, she remained emotionally unaffected, prioritizing her concern for her daughter, Baby. Sonny's detachment and irresponsibility forced Aila towards secret revolutionary undertakings. As a woman of mixed-racial heritage, Aila has confirmed her identity on both physical and psychological levels. While apartheid may seek to deny her power, outside its restrictions, she has recognised herself to be a woman of enormous strength and committed morality.



Summation

Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* unveils the complexities of identity through its intersectional perspective. The novel not only deals with the difficulties of race and gender but also investigates into the interconnecting dynamics of family, society, and political turmoil. Through characters like Aila, Hannah and Sonny the narrative encompasses the multilayers of identity, power, and resistance. It highlights on how characterstransfer their situations within repressive systems. Ultimately, *My Son's Story* serves as a compelling exploration of intersectionality, inspiring us to challenge the complexities of social orders and empower one's own independence.

The novel clearly shows how these overlapping identities affect personal and group experiences of prejudice and defiance. Gordimer uses characters such as Sonny, Aila, and Hannah to showcase the complexities of multiracial identities and the struggles. They are torn between societal expectations and personal dreams. The investigation shows how the systematic oppression of apartheid worsens the challenges faced by marginalized individuals, resulting in distinct types of domination and rebelliousness.

The paper also looks at how gender and sexuality, when combined with race, influence characters' positions in society and relationships. Sonny's particular experiences exemplify the wider consequences of being a mixed-race individual in a society that is deeply divided. His inner battles and outer challenges highlight the significance of intersecting identities on political engagement, family relationships, and individual satisfaction.

Overall, *My Son's Story* is a powerful story that not only portrays the brutal truths of apartheid but also offers a crucial perspective on the connections between identities. The paper highlights the importance of considering various aspects of identity in order to understand the full scope of social inequality and empowerment.

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