

The Personal Become Political:
Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* and
Duong Thu Huong's *Paradise of the Blind*

The phrase "The personal is political," has seen its reverse turned into a similarly common slogan - "The political is personal." Whichever side of the coin comes up first, it is a phrase which can be applied in equal measure to the two extraordinary *bildungsroman* novels to be compared in this essay. Nadine Gordimer's relentlessly chilling reflections on South African society during the height of apartheid - *Burger's Daughter* - and Duong Thu Huong's painful account of a Vietnam rift by ideological struggle and state-sponsored corruption - *The Paradise of the Blind* - both present accounts of lives where family relationships, rites of passage and instinctive human responses are all sublimated by political considerations. These two novels show that whether at the hands of a shadowy and rigid, if elite, totalitarian government such as that in South Africa, or the more openly corrupt and ideologically poisoned Communist system of Vietnam, personal lives and human dignity are both at the mercy of political systems which sustain themselves through strong-arm tactics, policies of denunciation and detention, and massive myth-making campaigns.

In this essay I will explore how, under such political systems, the main protagonists Rosa's and Hang's relationships with close family members are defined and limited by politics. I will describe the inhuman effect of the social environments created out of such systems, and show how each escapes the pull of her family's influence, with greater or lesser success, to define her own life. Finally I will discuss the techniques Gordimer and Huang employ to develop their themes.

Burger's Daughter strikingly highlights the way even the most personal events are affected by politics in the opening scenes of the book when Rosa, at thirteen, suffers the first pain of menstruation while waiting outside a prison to see her mother, who has been detained. Rosa's mother is a consummate revolutionary, stoic in the face of personal tragedy, persecution, and impending death - the perfect companion for the brilliant Lionel, Rosa's father. In place of warm recollections, Rosa remembers "a mouth that has learned to give nothing away when speaking; whose smile comes from the confidence not of attraction but of conviction" (82). As for Lionel, as a prominent leader in the Communist underground, he sets the tone for a household where party principles attain the sanctity of Church liturgy. As her early lover, Conrad, who has witnessed the activities of the family from the fringe, observes, ". . . being brought up in a house like your father's is growing up in a devout family. . . it was all taken in with your breakfast cornflakes" (50).

As Judie Newman points out in her essay "Prospero's Complex: Race and Sex in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*," "In the Burger household the children have few exclusive rights with their parents for whom intimate personal relationships are subordinate to the struggle" (129). In such a family, her mother's disease, brother's drowning, and the arrests and imprisonments of both parents are the landmarks of Rosa's youth, along with the tumultuous events of the day. Of the savage massacre of African patriots at Sharpeville, Rose ruminates that, at twelve years old, "Sharpeville was as immediate to me as what was happening in my own body" (115). Rosa belongs to that set

of “nicely brought up girls, fastidiously middle-class,” but for whom, none the less, “prison and exile are commonplaces of family life” (123).

All the normal markers of young womanhood are stained by the political exigencies of Rosa’s family. She visits a love interest in jail with whom she dreams of running away but for whom she is only a conduit of information. Another lover, the Swede, uses her to supply information for a biography he is writing on her father. Finally, everything in her life, studies, work, love affairs, “must fit in with the twice-monthly visits to the prison” (62) as long as her father lives. Rosa is on her way to being a committed Communist, as her parents were, but when she witnesses an abject family on a cart in Soweto, the father beating a brutalized donkey, the mother and child terrified and mute, she resolves to leave South Africa. “After the donkey I couldn’t stop myself,” she thinks. “I don’t know how to live in Lionel’s country” (210).

It is Lionel’s first wife Katya, a retired dancer living a sensuous, even dissolute, life of ease on the south coast of France to whom Rosa flees. Like Katya before her, Rosa “. . . wanted to know how to defect from him” (264). Katya introduces her to a voluptuous life of food, wine, sunshine, verdant foliage and the sea. She is surrounded by “People with nothing to hide from, no one to elude, careless of privacy, in their abundance” (224). She takes a married man, Chabali, for a lover and considers violating the requirements of her visa and moving to England to be his mistress. This idyllic life proves to be *un paradis inventé*, however, and in it Rosa realizes she would be like the woman in the Cluny tapestry gazing into a mirror which only reflects a unicorn, something that never was. A call from her childhood black brother, Baasie, drives home to her the fact that she must return to her homeland. As Sheila Roberts writes in her essay “Nadine Gordimer’s ‘Family of Women,’” “Rosa hoped for a full life of the body, the senses, and the intelligence, but sees that such a life, exclusive of commitment to others, is not justifiable, particularly not for a South African who does not want to be ‘just like the others’” (176).

One could argue that Rosa does not create her own fate. She follows in her father’s footsteps, the result of which is, inevitably, imprisonment. But Rosa freely and consciously chooses her lot, one that with the increasing involvement of the blacks in their own liberation will be different from her parents’ experience as whites in South Africa. She rejects a “self-indulgent and useless life” for one of commitment. “And so, in the midst of pleasure, leisure, and freedom, Rosa achieves new certainties, not those handed to her by her father, but her own” (Roberts 175).

In *Burger’s Daughter* the historical forces at work - the machinations of a repressive and racist government, and the efforts to overthrow it - are clandestine, hidden under a veil of superior white civilization as embodied in the myths the Afrikaners create about the colonization of South Africa. In Duong Thu Huong’s *Paradise of the Blind*, history is a maelstrom in which all are caught and know they are caught. The cruelty, hypocrisy, and injustice of the Communist system are made public spectacle for the intimidation of the masses. In this environment the girl, Hang, is torn between the rigid traditions of the past with their Confucian insistence on ancestor worship and the subordination of women, and the turmoil of a Vietnam that has become “a schizophrenic country where a people bled white by decades of war . . . had suddenly to defend themselves against their own leaders” (McPherson 7). Where Rosa’s birth dovetails with the first Afrikaner nationalist government, Hang’s comes just after a series of disastrous

events: the Land Reform Movement, the Rectification Campaign and the Collectivization Campaign.

These elements of a Vietnam under Communism - ancestor worship, female submissiveness, and government corruption from an often ignorant and grasping Communist elite - are embodied in those closest to Hang, respectively her aunt Tam, her mother Que, and her callous and officious uncle Chinh. Hang's relationships with each, and their relationships with one another, illustrate, in the words of Harriet Blodgett, "how destructive loyalties may be and how one must have the courage to recognize their threat."

For the child Hang, the threat presented by loyalty to her mother is yet indiscernible. Que is a traditional, self-sacrificing Vietnamese woman who "lived according to proverbs and duties" (14). Though Que loves Hang with a "strange devotion," Hang sees the sadness, drudgery and waste of her mother's life and fears turning into a woman like her: "I didn't dare ask her if, in another ten years, I would live her life, this life. The thought made me shiver" (70). As she matures, Hang is displaced in her mother's affections by her cousins, the sons of the abusive and corrupt Uncle Chinh, Que's brother. Though Chinh has destroyed his sister's life, having denounced the family of her husband, Ton, during the Land Reform Movement, Que, in keeping with her deeply Confucian world view, sees in her nephews her "two little drops of Do blood" (111). Que eventually starves both herself and her daughter to provide exquisite dishes for Chinh's family, dishes they must eat with the curtains closed in case the neighbors witness their distinctly unproletarian appetites. Though Hang recognizes "How intoxicating it can be, self-sacrifice" (115), she is repulsed by it and resists it: "How could my mother accept this humiliation? . . . Why did she love people who enslaved her?" (127)

In the same way Que invests her life in the Do family line, Aunt Tam sees in Hang the perpetuation of Hang's paternal line. On Hang's first visit to Tam's ancestral home in the village, Tam says of her, and in reference to her father, Ton, "She's a drop of his blood. My niece" (72). Tam's "adoption" of Hang sparks the alienation between Hang and Que, but it also provides for Hang the affection, education, and material comforts that her mother increasingly denies her. Tam helps Hang to escape the example set by her mother: "I was a different person now," she reflects. "I submitted to a different world, a new authority: the glory of the Tran family, my father and grandfather" (101).

This world, though seemingly benign, proves also to be a trap. This is a world "steeped in the brackish waters of the past," where "an indescribable backwardness hung in the air" (143). It is during an elaborate feast that Tam holds in honor of Hang's graduation that the young woman begins to understand the heavy burden that Aunt Tam is offering her, and the ramifications of her acceptance of it: "This woman, . . . this silence, this loneliness, this backwardness, were all one . . . as if through a fog, I saw a vision of my future" (143). She realizes too the price her aunt paid for her role as protector of the ancestral legacy; "a life deprived of youth and love, a victory born of the renunciation of existence" (248).

Like Rosa, Hang comes to realize that she too would be choosing an ephemeral paradise if she followed the path laid out for her by others, but for her it would be "the magical, unique paradise of childhood" (240). Resolved to choose a life for herself, Hang leaves her mother's house for the last time saying, "I felt no remorse. I took a deep

breath” (237). Though she holds more affection for Aunt Tam and, in the face of her imminent death, experiences “a deep, soundless cry of the flesh. . . erasing all borders between us,” (248), she rejects the role Tam has offered her as well. She rejects “the past with its legacy of wrongdoings and restrictions” (Blodgett), and resolves to sell the ancestral home. The only path towards dignity and growth lies in “different worlds, in the cool shade of a university auditorium, of a distant port where a plane could land and take off” (258).

For Hang, real self-determination requires a complete break with the world of her parents, a world, like the one Rosa returns to, of surveillance, ideological rhetoric, and moral decay. Gordimer and Huong are masters are constructing these worlds and both make use of finely crated characters to represent, among other values, the moral bankruptcy of society. Whether personified by the reprehensible Chinh, whose dishonesty and corruption are obvious, or the suave high-ranking official in the Afrikaner government – Brandt Vermeulen – who justifies the murderous activities of his government with the scripted lies of the Afrikaner myth, the worlds Hang and Rosa inhabit are ones where attacks on personal dignity and worth are commonplace.

Both *Paradise of the Blind* and *Burger’s Daughter* are presented largely as memoirs narrated by the heroine. In *Burger’s Daughter* the non-linear story is built up chronologically through the interwoven narrative voices of Rosa Burger and those who observe her. In Rosa’s case the voice is controlled and rational. As Roberts points out, though Rosa is perhaps “the most tragically affected of all Gordimer’s female protagonists . . . the reader only accepts intellectually that Rosa’s life is a tragedy.” She argues that Rosa is only credible while she maintains rigid control of her voice: “Had her suffering been desperate, she could not have convincingly been the trained daughter of Lionel Burger” (174). While the first person voice maintains an equilibrium of tone, despite the fact that it is directed to three different people - Conrad, Katya and Lionel - the third person voice varies suggesting perspectives of Rosa by different observers – the sympathetic party faithful who see her as “Little Rosa Burger,” the officials who keep her under surveillance, the friendly inhabitants of Katya’s quartier, the detached voice of dry official reports. As Newman points out, “she is only an object in the eyes of others whose internal reality remains unknown. A figure in an ideological landscape, she is placed by observers only in relation to their own political position” (124-125).

Where *Burger’s Daughter* employs a shifting voice, *Paradise of the Blind* is a compellingly evocative first-person narrative that employs a series of flashbacks recounted from Hang’s present, a present metaphorically represented as a long journey on a train. Where multiple perspectives in third person provide an intellectual framework in which to understand Rosa’s story, Hang’s subjective voice requires the reader’s immersion in the emotional impact of the action. We are removed from emotion in *Burger’s Daughter*; the “you” Gordimer addresses through Rosa is never the reader. In contrast, in *Paradise of the Blind*, the authorial voice speaks directly to us through Hang. The result is a more immediate and sensual reading experience as we see, hear, smell and taste the exotic offerings of Hang’s Viet Nam.

Through the characters of Rosa and Hang, Gordimer and Huong offer different solutions to the problem of life lived in Orwellian societies where relationships, family life, even language, are degraded in the service of political ends. Both, though, ultimately speak of the power of human endurance, self-knowledge, and freedom of thought in

creating societies where human dignity, not political ideology, dictates personal lives. Both novels champion what it is to be fully human.

Works Cited

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