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NOTION OF SPACE AS KNOWING ONE'S PLACE IN GORDIMER'S "MY SON'S STORY"

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ABSTRACT

Gordimer's *My Son's Story* can be taken as a historical document of a society divided by the effect of apartheid system, a policy of strict racial segregation and political and economic discrimination against non-whites practiced in the Republic of South Africa. *My Son's Story* is set in the decade prior to the beginning of the end of apartheid (1990) as a state policy. Gordimer in his novel tried to create a new cultural identity with the introduction of "coloured" identity. And further more, the novel illustrates the process of displacement of individuals. And at the same time Gordimer makes an attempt to construct a possible future of the society. To shape a new reality for a more liberated society, she showed how the characters in *My Son's Story* changed their place, position and created a new identity for them. This paper attempts to highlight notion of space as everyone's place in Gordimer's *My Son's Story*.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature works as a mirror of society and naturally reflects its culture, history, socio-cultural, socio-political background and values. So naturally during the apartheid period, most writers showed their protest through their works. As a native-born South-African, Gordimer took apartheid as her main subject through out her carrier. She gave politics a natural place in fiction and thus tried to respond to the social and political conditioned around them. In that period, a new order of community is needed and Gordimer tried to do that at some point with her *My Son's Story*. Although she was an outsider in the movement with which she sympathized, she understood the sense of alienation or difference that enabled her to write such a novel with a sense of the complexity of life. In *My Son's Story*, we can see how difficult it is to choose appropriate roles and duties in a time of social change and how one

changes one's position, place in order to create space for that time being.

The notion of Space brings into mind few categories namely the place which speaks of nominalization of location; displace which speaks of a place occupied in the past. Misplace which again brings in the notions of legitimacy and belonging and out of place which is conceived psychoanalytically and phenomenologically. In the novel, place was occupied by the blacks and apparently displaced by the whites and as long as the blacks do not see the whites as out of place they themselves continues to feel out of place.

'Knowing one's place' is not a static concept. It relates to both socio special phenomenological and psychological constraints and persuasions. Place is first about possession whether through aggression or inheritance. Place is also about situatedness of the body and its relation to the influences to which it is subjected. 'Knowing

one's place' is also psychoanalytical because it relates to the ideas of legitimacy and 'dwelling'.

Again it is not possible to be displaced but replaced. Same is with 'deterritorialization' which actually is 'reterritorialization'. Colonial anxiety comes into play when it is thought that the colonized are displaced but when actually they are replaced. Colonial displacement is about deterritorialization of blacks but in such displacement lies the notion of finding and knowing a place. This conscious of the place results in anti-colonial movements and discourages which is reterritorialization. So, in this replacement the displaced blacks are born with a new cognitive mapping resulting in a new sense of belongingness which is 'knowing one's place' in a new register.

The space syntax however relates to the attack that one can bring on time in processes of reterritorialization. In this process the blacks converge at an intense point of collective activity where one's place becomes the abiding obsession. Here in the blacks' insurgency 'Knowing one's place' becomes the agenda both externally and internally and externally because South Africa as a place evolves as a pignonocratic society. This is a kind of cognitive mapping which gets people know their place intensely and in a self-enhancing way and internal because this attack on historical time raises collective memory. This means that the internalization of the place is finally turned with the externalized understanding of the place.

So the South African black identity is about knowing one's placeness and place both. So the placeness makes the blacks better prepared to understand the place. The resurrectionary characters in the novel make ample manifestation of their placeness which results in a kind of social memory of common exploitation, while hegemonisation and racial hatred. In this reterritorialized space, the history of the place becomes the history of the people, history of the generation and in such a master narrative, communal specificities and black fragmentation we forgotten.

Knowing one's place is to know the other that is man knowing his community. We find a telluric memory working which is important for

forming black revolutionary community. Knowing one-self means trying to know within and understanding the black resurrection means to understand reterritorialization which leads to patriotic empowerment, ideological polarization and foundational essential identity.

A character is not what he does but what he does not do. We have subject at work when there is the performativity of the body and we find the non-subject at work with performativity of the mind. Sonny's relationship with the agitation amply substantiates this- Sonny's dynamic relation with agitation is an instance of knowing one's place. Sonny's engagement with the revolution means subject at work while his reading of the book in the library shows non-subject at work. Sonny's main characteristic is that of the literary imagination which is found by Hannah. But while knowing one's place, Sonny gets misplaced and so he is finally out of place. His power over woman had gone. His early powerful and masculine image is overshadowed: "A tide wearing away a coast line, little by little, falling into the ocean of time. They fall away, one by one, lovers, the clinging arms of children, the memory of when life was unthinkable without them. Fifty-two. And all the while he was triumphant in his vitality and virility, appeared unaffected by his forty-some thing years, this decay was taking place." (*My Son's Story*, 264)

Sonny is always in a self-conversational mode with himself where there is space for debate and opposition but in a dialogic mode with the world. Sonny raises more possibilities of knowing himself and not knowing himself. Alia raises lesser possibilities of knowing herself and not knowing herself. Two things come up here, one is response and the other is that of inexistence. Inexistence provides less activity though subject is at work and inexistence shows more activity with non-subject at work.

Alia is regarded as "wasted" instance of the novel but a deconstructive reading would show that she is definitely a very fertile wasteland. Her apparent quietness as the paragon while the stire within her is the ergon. She never spoke of Sonny's relationship with Hannah, but suddenly it is deciphered that Alia is connected with the guirella

warfare and continues her revolutionary activities. Sonny gets defocused and Aila becomes the centre of attraction. Therefore knowing oneself changes. The lazy, unworking, non-subjective is at work with Aila changing from a tamed, domesticated woman to a revolutionary. In her new situation, her silence is invested with different meaning. Her emergence to autonomous subjectivity and new authority overshadowed Sonny's masculine identity. In her new world she achieved a new subject position and space: "Aila emanated a stilling atmosphere; the parting jabber stopped. It was as if everyone found he had unnoticingly entered a strange house, and it was hers; she stood there." (*My Son's Story*, 249)

If we go through the novel then we will find that Will also understood his position, role and raised more possibilities. After being manipulated by Sonny into keeping the secret and having witnessed the transformation of his family under apartheid, he became a writer. In the last chapter Will revealed that he wrote the story in order to understand; knowledge and acceptance of his destiny comes only through writing. In spite of his suffering for his father's reaction to family and self-respect, he showed Sonny- Hannah love story leaving his own perspective. And here we find a transformed Will who told: "And so I've learned what he didn't teach me, that grammar is a system of mastering time; to write down 'he was', 'he is', 'he will be' is to grasp past, present and future." (*My Son's Story* 276)

CONCLUSION

A deconstructive reading of Gordimer's '*My Son's Story*' showed that the deconstruction of the fixed category of race through the coloured identity necessarily affected other categories of gender and politics. Gordimer in this novel attempted to create a new space for all characters who were passive at the beginning and also showed how one can lose his motive, goal, place with the emergence of others. On one side she had shown how Sonny and Will advanced towards their destiny and on the other hand through the emergence of Aila and Baby she showed the subversion of role which was necessary for that the then cultural and political condition of South Africa. Here we can find a voice of feminism also as Gordimer once wrote about feminist writing to the South African context in her 'Forward' to the

biography of Oliver Schreiner (1989b); "She (Oliver Schreiner) may have anticipated (as she did much else) the realization, now, by South African of all colours in the liberation movement, that feminism South African style is an essential component in the struggle to free our country from all forms of oppression, political and economic, racist and sexist." (First and Scott 1989:7)

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