



## **PORTRAYAL OF EXCRUCIATING LIVING CONDITIONS OF BLACKS IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *A WORLD OF STRANGERS***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Nadine Gordimer, a white South African novelist, driven by the urge of uninhibited courage to expose the dark side of Apartheid in her novels published A World of Strangers in 1958 when Apartheid was at its summit. The novel begins with the protagonist Toby Hood landing on the shores of South Africa from England as a representative of his family's publishing company. With this novel Gordimer signals her development as a writer which definitely has resulted in a better understanding of the situation in South Africa for she has shifted the focus from the inner world to the more outer world in the present novel. It can be seen through Toby's interaction and involvement with all the classes and races which is a more objective study of the South African society. Johannesburg, which was exclusively a white city in the making in The Lying Days (1950) has evolved to become completely a white world in A World of Strangers, where whites and blacks are complete strangers to each other or so does Toby observe. It can be said that the problem of apartheid in this novel is conceived at a social level and has been attempted to be solved at a social level which makes this text fall in the category of liberal humanism albeit in its last days in the novels of Gordimer.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gordimer reveals that for many whites coming to South Africa was like visiting some exotic place filled with a mystery of its own. The moment Toby sets his foot in the country he observes that whatever privileges whites have are "gained by discrimination and

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exploitation” ( WS 35).Blacks are reduced to nothing, sidelined and marginalized, so much so that they are removed entirely from the cities(meant exclusively for whites) to the periphery. Blacks are allowed only in the capacity of the servants. Toby notes that there “seemed to be a great many more white people than black....a black man wearing a dustcoat and a cap with the name of a firm in celluloid letters across it swooped to pick up a cigarette someone had dropped, and put it behind his ear...” (38-39).

Relegating blacks to the condition of extreme poverty, the policy of Apartheid deprived them of their rights as a citizen. Gordimer has brought forth very vividly the monotonous life of blacks in the novel when Toby, while taking a round of his workplace in the city of Johannesburg notes:

Down to my left, along the town bank of the cutting , I saw a thick queue sheltered under a tin roof .... And I saw that it was a bus queue; the people in it had the tired, unimpatient faces of those who wait in the same place at the same time every day. They were all black.

These faces in the Johannesburg bus queue bore all the marks of initiation into western civilization; they were tired by city noise, distasteful jobs, worries about money, desires for things they couldn't afford....(43)

Further with Toby's subsequent visits to black town ships and white suburbs. Gordimer gives a picture of extreme contrast in the living condition of the whites and the blacks:

On a rough stone gateway, white-painted iron letters spelt THE HIGH HOUSE. The drive was lined with round limbed, feathery trees; hydrangeas grew in green cumulus, billowing beneath them. I saw a tennis court, a swimming pool with a rustic changehouse, lawns green without texture, a lily-pond, a bank of irises, and then the house, built on a green mound. A large house, of course, rather like a bloated cottage, with a steep thatched roof curling up over dormer windows, thick white chimneys, and a balcony and abutting porch extending it on the two sides I could see. (48)

Hence it can be perceived that whites lived a luxurious life away from the daily rigors in a private world of their own secured with high walls and tall trees. On the other hand,

....an African township looked like something that had been razed almost to the ground. The mass of houses and shacks were so low and crowded together that the people seemed to be swarming over them, as if they had just invaded a



deserted settlement. Every time I went to a township I was aware of this sudden drop in the horizon of buildings and rise of humans; nothing concealed, nothing sheltered-in any but the most obvious sense-any moment of the people's lives. A blinding light of reality never left them. And they lived, all the time, in all the layers of the society at once: pimps, gangsters, errand boys, washwomen, schoolteachers, boxers, musicians, and undertakers, labourers and patent medicine men-these were neighbours, and shared a tap, a yard, even a lavatory. (130)

At one point in the novel Toby compares the way to the black township that is rutted to the "smooth driveway" of the white areas which is like a "tunnel of feathery green and flowers" (195). Each and everything was segregated in the name of apartheid. Neither blacks could enter the white world nor whites into the black. This is precisely the reason why Toby is stopped by the police and asked to report to the charge office because he "had no permit to be in the location" (194). Such was the state of obliviousness and separation that most of the whites didn't even know that such locations or 'townships' existed. It becomes clear when Toby tells Cecil about his visits to the township and her reaction is "'Where? What townships?' It was clear that she had no idea what I was talking about" (140).

Blacks were hardly considered humans by the whites. They were deliberately deprived of all the rights a citizen should have. Anna Louw, a white lawyer in *A World of Strangers*, works for the blacks trying to make them aware of their rights. Ironically, they didn't have any rights, only rules which proscribed them from a normal life. The culmination of the white atrocities is revealed to the reader by the William episode. Cecil Rowe, Toby's white friend, hears a sound of cry outside her house and finds that it is William, her floor cleaner. "'William! Cecil called. 'William!'- the voice of authority and reproof that never failed to bring him to the kitchen door....She felt the threat of a disaster she had never heard of, the dread of the discovery of some human sorrow unknown to her". The man, she is told has been smoking *dagga* a kind of drug. The only way to forget the pain they (blacks) suffer. It can be easily interpreted that their life was like a hell from which there was no escape for them. No matter how hard they tried, they were trapped from all sides. Theirs was "an unspeakable anguish of alienation, lostness, the howling of the wolf of the soul in waste" (199, 200).

When considering the novel from a historical perspective it would be worthwhile to throw some light on the political scenario of the dominant regime during that time. It was after the National Party victory in 1948 that segregation was constitutionalized. A specific ideology took the form of rigid and inflexible laws. In 1950, Prime Minister Dr. Daniel Malan "had parliament pass the two enabling laws that were essential preconditions" for apartheid



(Lapping 105).The first was Population Registration Act (1950) which “provided the machinery to designate the racial category of every person”(Thompson 190) and second the Group Areas Act, “empowered the government to mark off areas for residence, occupation and trade by the different ‘races’ and then to move each race into its ‘own’ area, by force if necessary”(Lapping 105) .Along with the two above mentioned laws the government also passed The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act(1949) and Immorality Act(1950) which “created legal boundaries between the races by making marriage and sexual relations illegal across the colour line...”(Thompson 190). Anna’s breakup of marriage with Hassim, an Indian, was a direct result of this Act although it has not been mentioned in explicit terms by Gordimer.

Hendrik Verwoerd was appointed the Minister of Native Affairs in 1950 and oversaw the passage of the Bantu Authorities Act in 1951 which provided salaries and privileges to the conservative African chiefs who complied with government policy and the Bantu Education Act (1955) which “transferred control of schools for Africans from provincial councils” to the government, in an attempt to “counter the influence of missionaries and others whose attitude to education was too liberal”(Lapping 109).All of Verwoerd’s policies were guided by his belief that there was “no place” for Africans “in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour” (qtd. in Lapping 109).

In *A World of Strangers* however, Gordimer has drawn a vivid picture of the world of fifties in South Africa. African National Congress was founded in 1912. In 1952, it joined forces with Indian and coloured resistance organizations. During that time multi-racialism was the dominant political policy followed by those who were opposed to apartheid .While African National Congress was for blacks, non-black supporters could join South African Indian Congress, the Coloured Peoples Congress and the (white) South African Congress of Democrats which together formed the Congress Alliance, an example of multiracial organization(Ross 122).The idea behind such an alliance was that the segregationist tendencies of the ruling government could be countered successfully only by the integration of various races for the common goal, in other words, by putting a multiracial front. There could be number of reasons for this. Firstly, ANC could not have sustained itself in its effort to uproot apartheid single handedly. Moreover taking into consideration the repressive policies of the regime a broader front was a necessity. Secondly it may be considered that multi-racialism was the result of ‘cause and effect’ phenomena. The ideology of apartheid caused its opposite i.e. multi-racialism into being.

The Congress Alliance seemed to be a radical organization in so far as it proposed many significant economic, political and social changes, but the ideology of the Congress was that of non-violent struggle, parliamentary democracy, and multi-racial cooperation which proved



it to be a liberal organization, especially the belief in ‘brotherhood of man’ as Gordimer herself remarked in one of her essays: “Men are not born brothers; they have to discover each other, and it is this discovery that apartheid seeks to prevent...”( *Telling Times* 62). It will be seen later that this brotherhood proved to be the crux of the novel in discussion. When the Liberal Party was formed in 1953, it had certain differences with the Congress Alliance as it thought that the congress is more influenced by the communist ideas. But later on the differences were reduced and during the Treason Trial liberals helped administer a fund for the same. In fact by the time *A World of Strangers* was published there was good deal of understanding between the ANC and the Liberal Party which definitely paved the way for a “democratic and humanistic multi- racialism” which forms the basis for the discourse in the novel (Clingman 49).

Besides the free encounter in politics there was at another level also the free encounter between blacks and whites was taking place to put it precisely, at a social level in the world of art, literature and music, which has been given a place in *A World of Strangers*. The era is described by Judie Newman as a “brief golden age” of fifties, when the social restrictions prescribed by apartheid suffered a little setback (15). But this liberal attitude was confined only to the black intellectuals and cultural elite working as journalists in the *Drum* magazine and *Golden City Post* in Sophiatown. They were able to gain access and mix with whites of similar calling in the city of Johannesburg. People like Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Todd Matshikiza absorbed the white world into their own. Sophiatown, a black township, in that respect was a ethnically mixed vibrant cultural hub of the fifties on the borders of Johannesburg. In other words it was a multi- racial world which can be considered a social counterpart of multiracialism in politics.

*A World of Strangers* thus, generated out of such political and social background. In fact this is one novel in which the social milieu of the text can be related to that of the author herself. In 1950s Gordimer involved herself in different aspects of Johannesburg life. She became friendly with many black writers, critics, and artists associated with *Drum* magazine like Lewis Nkosi, Todd Matshikiza, Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, Ezekiel Mphahlele. She became involved not only at social level but politically also. During the Treason Trial, Anthony Sampson while writing a book on the same stayed in Gordimer’s house, which gave her a good deal of political education as she herself remarked: “...it was often dinner and discussion into the small hours. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything; not only was it a fascinating experience, but it taught me more about the life of my own country than I could have learned in twenty years of ordinary living, within the ordinary social and conventional limits.”(Roberts 155).





The world of the 1950s as figured in *A World of Strangers* is more clearly discernible by the characterization. The characters seem to emerge out of the real people of that time. Anna Louw has more than a little to do with Bettie du Toit. Sam Mofokenzazi, the composer of the jazz opera in the text, bears resemblance to Todd Matshikiza a South African pianist and the composer of *King Kong* the all-black musical (“Todd”). Steven Sitole draws on Can Themba for Steven in the novel lived in the “House of Fame” (WS 134) and Can in real life lived in a house named ‘The Home of Truth’ in Sophiatown. In fact the most interesting correspondence is that of the central character Toby Hood who resembles Anthony Sampson, the editor of Drum magazine from 1951 to 1955. Sampson was an Englishman who came to South Africa on a publishing venture. Some incidents in the novel seem to relate quite closely to what actually happened. Sampson narrates about the narrow escape during a police raid on a party at Can Themba’s house, which reminds of Toby’s escape of a similar kind with Steven Sitole from a shebeen in the novel (Sampson 153-55). However it would be inappropriate to relate Gordimer’s characters on one to one basis for her characters represent not specific but general. It is possible to relate her characters to specific people because they happened to be famous in their time but in doing so, those several common and unidentified populace cannot be ignored on whom she might have modeled her characters. Her characters go on “...to represent, as extreme condensations of more widely dispersed traits and possibilities, a feeling for the socially ‘typical’-those ostensibly essential features that represent a whole mood and the moment” (Clingman 52).

Very much similar to the characterization is Gordimer’s treatment of the social history in the novel which is far more inclusive than just pertaining to single incidents. Similar to *The Lying Days* in its observation of the social environment, *A World of Strangers* too explores the world of blacks and whites in Johannesburg. The life of Alexandra township, shebeens of Sophiatown are contrasted with the extraordinary luxurious world of ignorant whites in the High House which infact represent the typical traits of the whites in South Africa-“...its vulgar wealth, its cultural alienation and banality, its aggressive ‘heartiness’ and...its internal brutalization and latent murderousness...”(Clingman 53).

Throughout *A World of Strangers*, Gordimer tries to prove that private life is impossible in South Africa. Private destiny is just inconceivable beyond its social integration which definitely brings in another level of historical and social consciousness in the novel-the self revealing aspects of it. Gordimer does it with none other than but her central character Toby Hood. Toby is apolitical and is determined to lead a private life. He sets aside the “bluebooks, the leaflets, the surveys, the studies” –everything he has read about South Africa and enjoys instead the “luxury” of sweet drinks and tropical warmth (WS 19, 21). Family and friends back home want to collect data and write newsletter and become in essence a “voyeur of the world’s ills and social perversions” but the idea leaves him hostile and irritated. He longs to



“...shout, ridiculously: I want to live! I want to see people who interest me and amuse me, black, white, or any colour. I want to take care of my own relationships...and let the abstractions of race and politics go hang...” (36).

Quickly he finds how difficult it is to accomplish this seemingly simple goal in Johannesburg of 1950s for habit, hate and law conspire to separate whites from blacks and create a ‘world of strangers’. Clingman has criticized the character for not making any contribution to bridge that gap himself. Toby on the contrary maintained the separated world of blacks and whites. He simply drifts between the exclusively white High House and shebeens of Sophiatown with an attitude of indifference and detachment. In fact he keeps the two worlds apart by not telling Cecil Rowe his beloved about his friendship with Steven Sitole, a black, for the fear of losing her which he is not prepared to. His quest for personal pleasure overrides any compunction of conscience. In fact Gordimer condemns his attitude especially with regard to women. He regards women as objects of desire. When he gets disturbed from a racist act in his office by one of his workers he finds himself unwilling to share with Cecil, his love interest. Rather he finds her a pleasurable distraction and ruminates: “I had, I supposed, an Eastern equation of women with pleasure; I fiercely resisted any impingement on this preserve” (Gordimer, *WS* 150). Treating women as an object for personal gratification is to be preserved according to Toby. Later in the novel when Toby witnesses a beautiful Indian girl singing at an Indian club he describes her as a creature “made to please” (192). He echoes similar thoughts towards the end of the novel, when rejecting the thought about marriage he says. “...for me, the exoticism of women still lay in beauty and self absorbed femininity, I would choose an houri rather than a companion...” (261). It is clear from Toby’s attitude that he has commodified and degraded women to the exotic ‘other’ meant for personal use. Taken as a metaphor Toby’s attitude can be compared with the attitude of whites towards blacks. It is precisely the way, whites viewed blacks, exotic others meant for exploitation. In that way, there exist” clear affinities between the psyche of Toby Hood and the institutionalized mind-set of the apartheid regime” (Head 49).

Toby lacked social commitment and in this approach he has a counterpart in the black world- Steven Sitole who is sick of being a black man, a black man who experiences discrimination in all the quarters. He wants to live a reckless life, and refuses to care about “...this they’ve taken from us, that they denied our children, pass laws, injustice- agh, I’m sick of it. Sick of feeling half a man. I don’t want to be bothered with black men’s troubles...” (Gordimer, *WS* 102). A clearer picture of Steven emerges in Anna’s description:

You won’t catch Steven working with Congress or any other African movement....He never defied, either-I’m talking about the defiance campaign, the passive resistance movement of a year or two back. The only defiance he’s



interested in is not paying his bills, or buying drink. He's... embittered, devil-may-care African...He doesn't care a damn about his people; he's only concerned with his own misfortune....(122)

Toby's friend Anna Louw, the first of female characters in Gordimer's fiction whose professional life is dedicated to radical political change, talks to Toby about his neutrality. Anna sees that Toby uses his status as a stranger to mix with both blacks and whites and avoid allegiance to one group or other. She remarks: "... 'You think you'll keep free, with one foot here and another there, and a look in somewhere else, but even you, even a stranger like you, Toby- you won't keep it up'..."(184). Gordimer eventually reveals that this approach is not only illusory but deplorable. It is made evident very forcefully through the life and death of Steven. While Toby is out on a hunting expedition with the High House friends, Steven is killed like a hunted animal in a car crash while making an escape from a police raid on an Indian club. Irrespective of what Toby believed him to be, for the policemen who reported his death to him Steven's identity remained to be that of a 'kaffir'. Moreover, Steven's death brings home some truths to Toby. He realizes that in the attitude of egocentrism and social indifference "...he was me, and I was him..."At the same time it also dawns on him that he(Steven) "was in the bond of his skin, and I was free; the world was open to me and closed to him;..."(252). The attitude of self-centered indifference of Toby helped to constitute the social divide of the 'world of strangers' and the only redemption for Toby was a new social commitment Gordimer tries to measure this commitment with the beginning of his friendship with Sam Mofokenzazi, which turns out to be more sober, with a deep new dedication. In fact the beginning of this new friendship marks the climax of the novel. Toby transforms from a mere narrator to a character by involving himself more deeply in the society in which he lives. Toby's commitment is more of an external nature which has a direct bearing on the society as is clear from the end of the novel. When at the station of Johannesburg Sam and Toby are departing for their respective ventures, Gordimer writes: "But at the bottom of the steps, where the train was waiting, he was there before me, laughing and gasping, and we held each other by the arms, too short of breath to speak, and laughing too much to catch our breath, while a young policeman with an innocent face, on which suspicion was like the serious frown wrinkling the brow of a puppy, watched us"( 266).Sam and Toby both are able to transcend social barrier due to their humanistic conscience and succeed in interpersonal relationship.

Although it can be argued that the resolution Gordimer posits for such a massive problem of apartheid based on consciousness of an individual and interpersonal commitment is not only naïve but ideological in its approach but then by doing so she is adhering to the liberal ideologies persisting during the 1950s.Observed closely, Gordimer does criticize the naïve liberal humanism in the text, when Toby describes a fashionable liberal socializing: "It was





inevitable, with all the books and newspaper reports being written about South Africa, that the forbidden fraternization should become, in a sense, fashionable....They were often people who had failed to secure attention in other ways....It began to be fashionable...to have at least one African friend. A pet-African..." (169).

Nevertheless *A World of Strangers* still holds its position as a liberal novel because the novel concludes with the recognition and understanding of the problem of apartheid that plagued South Africa. Throughout the text Toby observes as a narrator the magnitude of the problem which culminates with the death of Steven Sitole. It is done so that in his final commitment as a character he should not underestimate it.

Stephen Clingman describing in the term of Roland Barthes called *A World of Strangers* a work of 'classical realism' which means that it undertakes the task of presenting social reality as objectively as possible (60). But Toby cannot remain untouched by his observations of the divided society, and he is transformed from an 'armchair strategist' to somebody who enters the struggle. He realizes the necessity of his own personal engagement and the impossibility of his detachment from the same.

Hence in keeping with the ideology of the Congress Alliance of the 1950s the novel has shown that "the most objective of eyes will naturally and inevitably draw humanist conclusions from the facts of social evidence," hence it emanates "moral positivism"(Clingman 61). It also indicates that any individual who has the capacity to think and reason must become socially engaged in the endeavour to produce a better society based on equality. This is what exactly South African liberalism preached. The novel proposes the idea that the barriers of apartheid can be overcome with education, rationality and sustained efforts. By doing so Gordimer did not deviate from the historical reality of her time because this so called 'ideological' liberalism was in fact the political reality of South Africa (in the quarters that were opposed to apartheid).The very formation of the Congress Alliance stands testimony to it. Irrespective of the internal differences between various congresses, together they achieved a moral transcendence of racial and economic differences. Moreover the congress' belief in non-violent opposition further affirms its stand on morality. It believed that their struggle was for a just cause which no rational being in possession of evidence could deny. Hence the Defiance campaign which revealed the indignities of the repressive system and the demonstration of women in Pretoria against the extension of pass laws stand as an indicative to the dedication, dignity and vitality of an alternative South Africa.

Since Stephen Clingman used the term 'classical realism' for the novel which meant the realistic representation of the world, it would be worth noticing that Gordimer portrayed the social reality by taking recourse to symbolism as one of the modes. At one point in *A World*



*of Strangers* Toby describes a mining landscape on Johannesburg's East Rand interpreting the heap of cyanide dump masquerading as hills which gives a false impression of being a natural landscape. It symbolizes the fallacy of the culture which has built it, that is, to think that South Africa belongs to them when actually it does not. Another more profound symbolism is inherent in the hunting scene towards the end of the novel, wherein the deepest truths emerge about the white South African world. As Toby describes it, the landscape takes on a symbolic significance. Moreover, waking in the middle of his first night in the camp, Toby hears a frightening sound rolling "out over the stillness...a yowl from the entrails of desolation, the echo of a pack of nightmares..." which was more of an internal nature (240). It can be interpreted as the underlying fear among the oppressors that threatens the everyday realities of South Africa.

Toby links his hunting activity with the death of Steven like a hunted animal and thus his own complicity in his friend's killing. If "he'd been a white man" it wouldn't have happened to him (256). Hence Symbolism brings home harsh realities to Toby. It makes him understand the true picture surrounding him and his own stand in it. Ultimately it forces him to challenge those realities. It is through symbolism only that Toby is delivered back into the real world.

*A World of Strangers* is sometimes also regarded as a 'frontier text'. Anna Louw, the white South African working for the upliftment of blacks is the frontier character in the text, who thinks that she is not "enough" to herself. She wants to "change things" because she hasn't "got the divine selfishness" which definitely other whites got (211). Anna is portrayed as a "real frontiersman who had left the known world behind and set up her camp in the wilderness..." (175). Like her, *A World of Strangers* also attempts to bridge the gap between the two worlds. However it remained in the in-between world and did not cross the border. Although it has challenged the inherent apartheid in the South African society, no clear resolution to it has been offered besides Toby's renewed social commitment which in itself is doubtful. But then it is so because Gordimer is depicting the political realities of 1950s. The opposition movements explored the frontiers of the existing reality without crossing any boundaries. Hence they wanted a reform within the given structure and not its total replacement. The Congress Alliance and particularly the African National Congress demanded a society based on partnership and sharing within the given social setup. The primary objective was "the winning of political and civil rights within the basic framework of South Africa's existing parliamentary democracy" (Gerhart 45). Even the methods of opposition which included passive resistance, stay-at-homes, peaceful demonstrations and civil disobedience were 'civil' in nature and never an outright confrontation. Most of the methods were indeed due to the practical and political predicament of the congress.



But in response to that the government conducted raids and enacting further repressive legislation arrested 156 people on the charges of high treason in December 1956 (Thompson 209). In the novel, Anna Louw is arrested as a part of this sweep. It was only when the peaceful means and just demands were met with more repressive measures and outlawing the organizations by the government did the objective of the ANC changed completely that is to say from reformation to revolution.

*A World of Strangers* celebrates Sophiatown, the vibrant and ethnically mixed township on the city border, but its destruction was already underway on the orders of the government under the Group Areas Act (1950), when Gordimer was writing this novel. Demolition began on 'Toby Street' which marked the frontier between the black township and the white world of Johannesburg (Huddleston 118). "Sophiatown was rezoned for Whites and renamed Triomf (Triumph)..." (Thompson 194). After the destruction of Sophiatown the government arrested and banned individuals and associations committed to the multi-racial ideals of the Congress Alliance and Freedom Charter. With this the exuberance and optimism shown in *A World of Strangers* went away. The novel's documentary detail, its pronounced realism, makes it a literary monument to a place and an ideal literally crushed by apartheid's power for *A World of Strangers* was banned by the state. Thus it indicates how deeply the present text has demonstrated the historical moment of its time. The novel also has embedded in itself the assumptions and visions of the period it represents.

In an essay published in 1959, the year following the publication and banning of the novel and the year the separatist Pan –Africanist Congress was founded, Gordimer asks, "Where Do Whites Fit in?" She answers: "Nowhere, I'm inclined to say, in my gloomier and least courageous moods..." (*Essential Gesture* 31). But she argues that "nowhere" is an answer "in the same category as remarks like *What's the use of living?* in the face of the threat of atomic radiation. We are living," she writes and then speaks for fellow South African whites, "we are in Africa" (32). Like Toby who cried, "I want to live! I want to see people who interest me and amuse me, black, white, or any colour," she declares that whites who want to live in "the new Africa" want merely to be ordinary members of a multi-coloured, any coloured society" (WS 36; *Essential Gesture* 32).

As police violence escalates, as Africans are evicted and relocated in wastelands, as thousands are detained without charge, Gordimer realizes that there is nothing so damaging to the ego as being born under the weight of white rule. Gordimer thus has been successful in drawing the attention of the world to the most oppressive system that existed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when everywhere human rights was taking precedence.



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