

Shifting Power Structures in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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Abstract

Social inequalities have grown within and in between countries both during colonial era and post colonial era. But when circumstances have a shift the power structures also take a turn. The dominated becomes the dominant. The shift in the power structure brings a change both to the dominant and the dominated and thereby leads to conflict. Nadine Gordimer's novels deal with these conflicts and hence are intensely political and are also simultaneously fictional representations of the socio-political history of South Africa.

July's People is set against the outbreak of a South African civil war between black rebels and the white ruling class. In the ensuing chaos, the whites Maureen and her husband Bam have been forced to seek shelter from their black servant July and hence become dependent upon him. They are compelled to live in July's village with the other Blacks. The new world is upside down, but the urge for survival is greater than the misery and squalor of the black quarters and above all they find it difficult to run their lives according to their former servant's instructions. This paper focuses on the differences in social behaviour, cultural fusion and political interactions in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. Gordimer, a revolutionist against apartheid, portrays the black revolution and its consequences in this novel. Gordimer in this novel scrutinizes the cultural relationship between the white and black classes in South Africa.

Keywords: Apartheid, black revolution, cultural fusion, political interaction.

The conclusion of World War II witnessed a series of violent eruptions of national liberation struggles in the colonial countries. These struggles, expressing the crisis of imperialism in the epoch of capitalist decline, brought sharply into relief the major problems of colonies and semi-colonies. Hitherto, the colonial struggles had remained by and large in the background of the historic struggles of this century, despite the fact that fully three-quarters of the world's population live in the colonial countries, while the super-exploitation of this huge mass of humanity provides the real foundation for the material and cultural development of Europe in particular.

The Age of Reason has turned out to be the Age of Structure; a time when, in the absence of purpose, the drive for power as a value in itself has become the principal indicator of social approval. And the winning of power has become the measure of social merit. (Saul)

Franz Fanon has dealt with the mental and psychological world of the colonized black people, especially the ones in South Africa, expounds the living spaces and conditions of the white and black people in colonies which are completely dissimilar:

The settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes although the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones. The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners. The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs (Fanon, 39).

Nadine Gordimer, was born to white parents in a small mining town near Johannesburg. She had witnessed the racial discrimination and atrocities which were perpetrated on the Black by the Whites. Being an activist against the apartheid system, Gordimer's most dominant theme in her novels is the problem of apartheid that infested the whole South African society. Her novels deal with the cultural and racial issues that marked South African Society. There are various ethnic groups among the Blacks in South Africa which is a multiracial society with several major and minor groupings based on culture. South African society is also divided into distinct subgroups by the colour of their skin.

Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) which was published in 1981, i.e. just a decade before apartheid was officially ended, outlines a realistic perspective of transformed identities a black revolution, which was followed by a chaotic scenario. Gordimer explains the unfair and unequal living conditions of the whites and non - whites in her novels.

July's People, depicts the lives of a liberal white South African family, the Smales who were forced to flee to the village of their black servant, July. In order to escape from the ensuing violence, they must accept July's charity and have to live a life that makes them all confront their assumptions about one another. In July's village they take up a new life, where the masters have become fully dependent upon the servant. Their roles are switched into reversal as the servant becomes the master and the master becomes the servant. However, the white family does not seem to be eager to leave their power, dominion and superiority even in rural area among black society.

The novel is narrated by Maureen Smales, the protagonist, who struggles to adapt herself flexible to their present life. Maureen's inability to adapt the new culture and environment in July's village frustrates her because she cannot establish a valuable role among her family members or with the village people. Therefore, she tries hard to seek a parallel role with the other women in the village, in order to accomplish a reality for herself.

Gordimer depicts the huts where black people live in:

She slowly began to inhabit the hut around her, empty except for the iron bed, the children asleep on the vehicle seats – the other objects of the place belonged to another category: nothing but a stiff rolled-up cowhide, a hoe on a nail, a small pile of rags and part of a broken Primus stove, left against the wall. The hen and chickens were moving there; but the slight sound she heard did not come from them. There would be mice and rats. Flies wandered the air and found the eyes and mouths of her children, probably still smelling of vomit, dirty, sleeping, safe (Gordimer, 4).

However, the house of Bam's family in the city is quite different, "the house is relatively luxurious and it includes seven rooms, a swimming pool and there are servants in this house" (25). But now the Smales family have to stay in the mud hut provided to them by their servant July in his village. Through the relationship of the Smales family and the community they are brought to, particularly through the relationship of Maureen and July, Gordimer points out how dependent even the most progressive of people are on these

arbitrary distinctions. Their relationship becomes complex because July is not their servant now, but their host and savior. This turns into a power reversal.

Maureen's attempt to adapt the new environment is visible when she rolls her jeans high to work in the field with the other women, "they [the black women of the village and Maureen] worked along a donga like a team, unspokenly together, now side by side, now passing and repassing each other, closely" (92). She also worries about the hygiene of their kids that they are drinking river water and have to bath in a metal tub.

An example of their changed social interactions is obvious when Maureen disapproves of July's holding of their car keys. July declares that he has noticed Maureen's different attitude in the village in comparison to their life in the city; then he was allowed to keep all their keys without being questioned. He also expresses his disappointment of her disapproval and states that he had been their servant for fifteen years and they used to rely on him. Primarily, the reason for Maureen's questioning July's holding of the keys without their permission is her sense of losing control of their possessions within this unfamiliar social context. Their discussion ends with July in charge of their keys. Since July keeps their keys as well as drive their car without their permission, it is obvious that his authority gradually increases.

Again in a situation when Maureen conveys her desire to work in the fields in harvesting with Martha and other women, July strongly denies her wish by stating that it is inappropriate work to Maureen. At this point, the shift of power between the master and servant is obvious and July appears to dominate instead of Maureen when denying her to work with the other women in the village. Maureen sticks to old social structures and values, because she is unable to accept and to adjust to the present social disorder.

In addition, the incident with the theft of Bam's gun arouses questions in Maureen's mind and she confronts July regarding his possible involvement in this matter. They discuss July's friend Daniel, whom Maureen suspects has stolen Bam's gun. Maureen demands that July return the gun to them and due to July's reluctance to reveal the truth; she becomes furious and accuses him of stealing from them in the past. During July's years as a servant with Smales family, Maureen overlooked his theft because she believed July to be the person who was suitable for them. She is now aware of the fact that his values do not correspond to her values. "She was not his mother, his wife, his sister, his friend, his people" (152). July is deeply offended by her accusations regarding the theft from the Smales. As a way of retaining his power and authority of her, he communicates in his own language. Although Maureen does not understand his words she understands his message; July's face mirrors his emotion and the tones from his voice clarify the context.

Evidently, the gun is stolen by July's friend Daniel, and the aim of the theft is to join the rebels in their war against the whites. July's exposure regarding Daniel's theft emphasizes their tense interaction and in a state of fury Maureen expresses her opinion about July:

You'll profit by the others' fighting. Steal a bakkie. You want that, now. You don't know what might have happened to Ellen. She washed your clothes and slept with you. You want the bakkie, to drive around in like a gangster, imaging yourself a big man, important, until you don't have any money for petrol, there isn't any petrol to buy, and it'll lie there, July, under the trees, in this place among the old huts, and it'll fall to pieces while the children play in it. Useless. Another wreck like others. (153)

In Bam Smales's former life, his profession as an architect meant a social position which included properties, cars and a comfortable suburban life. But, in July's village, he is merely the white man with his family under July's supervision. However, both Maureen and Bam are grateful for July's assistance with their escape from possible violence and death during the riots. Primarily, life in July's village implies primitive conditions and the loss of possessions. "They had nothing" (29). The remaining possessions from their past is the car, (the bakkie) and Bam's gun.

The bakkie is more possessive to Bam as it was his birthday gift and this is the vehicle Bam used to go for his hunting. Moreover, it has been the means for their escape from the riots in Johannesburg, and serves as a symbol of his previous social position. After July's return from the shopping errand, Bam's behaviour demonstrates a distinct master manner. "Bam had not greeted him [July]. Maureen was unbelieving to see on the white man's face the old, sardonic, controlled challenge of the patron. – And where were you yesterday? What's the story? (53) Bam's reaction as the patronizing white master of July is an indication of his resistance and fear of being deprived of his possessions.

Later in the narrative, after the theft of Bam's gun occurs, Bam's loss of power is further emphasized. Although Bam expresses indications of resistance against the deprivation of his possessions, he appears to adjust to the new existence in the village. His days seem to be filled with work; he assists July with mending the farming tools and he also makes his own arrangements, such a water tank in order to facilitate the water supply for the villagers. Bam's engagement with the daily tasks of the village impresses the other village men, and therefore he is invited to their beer-drinking gathering on a Saturday. After that invitation, Bam feels the acceptance of the other men which may facilitate his adjustment to the culture of July's village. "Bam's adaptation is a remarkable and hopeful indication of a species characteristic essential for survival" (Bailey 219).

Another aspect of Bam's changed behaviour can be discerned when he contributes to the supply of meat in the village. He shoots wart hogs with his gun which originally was intended for hunting birds. The thrill he used to experience during his previous hunting trips, where killing appeared to be a pleasure and a game, is completely altered here in the village. Instead Bam becomes aware of the reality of hunting and he seems to pity the wart hogs he killed and compares the sight of them with the birds that he used to shoot during his former hunting trips. Noteworthy, in contrast to his suburban life, Bam appears to have a more fatherly attitude towards his children, mainly because they constantly follow him during the days: "- the children were generally around, as the blacks' children were always about their adults" (35). The existence in the village has given Bam the opportunity to emphasize the social interactions with his children in comparison with his former life where he was devoted to his career as an architect. There is a mixture of elements that contributes to Bam's shift and adaptation to the cultural behaviour of the village.

July is portrayed as a kind and obedient man to his master though his served are completely dependent upon him. July was an unresisting servant to the Smales' family for fifteen years. During the years in town, July's behaviour was satisfactory and his masters had nothing to complain about; he was considered to be reliable. From the Smales' point of view, their unequal relationship worked without major problems and they felt they could trust him.

However, now in the village, July takes his own decisions and initiatives without asking for Bam's permission. In July's opinion, it is quite natural that he is in charge of the car keys as well as of the car since he provides them with the necessities during their stay. The Smales are now deprived of their possessions and consequently their relationship with July, as master and as servant, is different. Although July as the master appears to dominate the relationship between him, Bam and Maureen, he is reluctant to completely take over the role as the protector of the Smales family.

At the end of the novel, there is a sound of an approaching helicopter and without hesitation Maureen leaves the hut, crosses the river and runs towards the landing ground. The escape demonstrates a different behaviour of Maureen as she flees from her role of motherhood when she leaves her three children behind. Moreover, she leaves her husband, whom she hardly recognizes any longer. As she runs, she anticipates to be rescued, but from the novel we are never told about the identity of the people on board; whether they are black rebels or not. The reason for her decision to escape from the village implies that the existence in the village is unbearable for her; she clings to her former behaviour, such as maintaining her social control over July. However, her previous norms and values change; Maureen considered herself to be liberal in her past life, but now she seems to have difficulties in adjusting to a new social order in a different social context and also to a

changed power structure where July is in command of their life. The intention of *July's People* was commented by Smith as:

July's People could be seen as primarily prophetic and admonitory, its warning at every stage in the depiction of the alien roles thrust on its white protagonists forced to flee their threatened white city to the protection of their servant's tiny... village in the bush. To relegate to the past all the trappings of white invulnerability, to imagine them irretrievably destroyed, could be seen as the central intention of the novel. (Smith)

Though Maureen looks defeated and less enabled from her power role, her children have absorbed the African ideologies, traditions, values, language and emerge both consciously and unconsciously turn upside down in the African society to be accepted by them. These children succeeded in passing into the African black society because they have already constructed an identity that values sharing and redistributing wealth, skills, and emotions.

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