

The Ruler and the Ruled: A Reflective study of *July's People*

Priya Sandhu

Assistant Professor in English, Sri Guru Gobind Singh College, Chandigarh

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ABSTRACT

The commitment to art and society has been a persistent concern with artists around the world. The act of writing is seldom innocent, as it becomes inundated with various ideological discourses some heard and others smothered. Many writers under the oppressive regime of Apartheid have lashed out against it, determined not just to document society but also to hasten its transformation. Nadine Gordimer, a Nobel Laureate became the voice of the ruled under this ideology of racial hierarchy. She was South Africa's most celebrated writer who lived her life by a firm moral compass. She explored the most intimate spaces within and between South Africans with acute sensitivity and honesty bringing forth the terrible scars of intolerance, racism, oppression and violence. As she wrote in protest she faced censorship, reinforcing her dual commitment towards ethics of living and aesthetics of writing.

The present paper throws light on the semi-allegorical and strained '*July's People*', which was banned under apartheid and faced censorship under the post-apartheid regime. Published in 1981, '*July's People*' predicts the collapse of the white South Africans and the emergence of a new social political reality that requires them to fashion the contours of their new identity. A concoction of the personal and political realm, it raises the question whether the political freedom of one set of people will mean happy times for all. This paper will examine the motives of human beings, governments and regimes which are always suspect no matter what ideologies they purport to embrace.

The definition of intellectual freedom is hotly contested, there is no consensus in literature about the precise meanings of the term, or the universal legal status of these freedoms. Some argue that intellectual freedom is not a universal value, but is specific, contextual and contested with the contest over its meaning being played out on shifting ground according to new rules. Many writers under the oppressive regime of apartheid have challenged censorship in their works. In their writings society is depicted not simply as a backdrop to essentially individual conflicts, but as the necessary material for understanding these conflicts. Gordimer too has succeeded in fusing these two aspects in her writing and emerged as the most resourceful writer to have distilled fiction from the experience of apartheid. Her international literary eminence is complemented by her role within South Africa as an activist in the culture of resistance, and an articulate opponent of censorship, detention without trial, Bantu education and as an assiduous organizer of writers across the racial divide.

The ideology of separation and white dominance led to South Africa's apartheid era, a period in history marked by fear, violence and resistance. Apartheid is an Afrikaans word meaning separateness. As the political ideology practiced in South Africa, it means territorial separation, separate administrative and social structures for whites and the various racial groups. Apartheid was the result of the white supremacy's fear of losing hold on domination and had profound effects on the lives of countless South Africans. Throughout the apartheid era, censorship was used as a political tool to control and influence public opinion. Numerous publications, both from South Africa and abroad, were banned and removed from circulation, school curricula was altered, an ambient discourse of "positive uplifting" was propagated, libraries and bookstores were scrutinized. Vast majority of

writers were directly or indirectly affected by publications control. Censorship was implemented through the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963, and the Publications Act of 1974 and the subsequent Publications Amendment Act of 1978. Censorship also operated through more diffused means, such as propaganda and other coercive tactics.

The present paper titled "**The Ruler and the Ruled: A reflective study of *July's People***" explores this very contested space. Gordimer has forged her considerable body of work out of circumstances that combined privilege and embattlement. This situation required of her an uncommon imaginative resilience. Gordimer maintained her fierce opposition to racial segregation in her writing, leading to several of her works being banned by the South Africa government. A *World of Strangers* was banned for 12 years and her 1979 novel *Burger's Daughter*, was banned a month after it was published. *July's People*, a novel Gordimer published in 1981, faced government scrutiny post-apartheid and was taken off school reading lists in 2001.

Published in 1981, thirteen years before the official demise of apartheid, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* foresees the inevitable collapse of white South Africa and the emergence of new political and social realities that would require white South Africans to fashion the contours of a new identity. It was deeply ironical that *July's People* book written by a fervent anti-apartheid campaigner such as Gordimer should get embroiled in a post-apartheid controversy in 2001, as it was found by readers to be an anachronism that projects a South Africa future that did not happen and was considered therefore of no interest to modern learners. The novel was temporarily banned and subjected to a scrutiny of the panel of four white teachers and they were given the responsibility of assessing whether or

not the novel promoted post-apartheid values of tolerance and egalitarianism. In my paper I have endeavored to analyze *July's People* keeping in mind this premise. I have questioned the content of the report supporting my arguments through the text, interviews and by quoting a few essays written by Gordimer and have built arguments to expose the inherent prejudices and political motives behind the ban.

The novel begins at an ending, the end of history as Maureen and Bam the main protagonists have conceived it and the beginning of an inconceivable future. Maureen and family wake in a disembodied nowhere and almost immediately a disoriented Maureen must remember the past and the debris of yesterdays existence. The novel begins with a knock at the door, not the much dreaded inauguration into the terror of waiting cars, torture, and firing squads, but the arrival of morning tea, brought by their servant who has now become their host. This morning ritual conjures unthinkingly the normality of their past life, floating on privilege above currents of injustice and violence. Maureen and Bam have become the guests of their servant who has been a vital part of their lives, though not recognized as more than a serviceable tool requiring constant surveillance despite their liberal protestations. As Ms. Gordimer writes: "The decently-paid and contented male servant, living in their yard since they had married, clothed by them in two sets of uniforms, khaki pants for rough housework, white drill for waiting at table, given Wednesdays and alternate Sundays free, allowed to have his friends visit him and his town woman sleep with him in his room – he turned out to be the chosen one in whose hands their lives were to be held; frog prince, savior, July." (*July's People* 34).

When Johannesburg erupts into violence Barn, Maureen, their children, and July bundle into the family's "light truck and make the three-day journey to the Bantustan where they take shelter in July's hut." (*July's People* 56). That voyage is the first of the novel series of elaborate reversals, it becomes a retributive reenactment of forced removal, the government policy that drives all unwanted blacks "superfluous appendages" in official language into Bantustan dumping grounds. And so the Smaleses are initiated into black experience by being deprived of their freedom of movement. Hemmed in, uncertain when or if the waiting will end, they receive a mandatory education in the sensation of statelessness. Through such layered reversals, Gordimer stages an inquiry into the psychology and economics of dependency. The question for Gordimer in this novel is not so much who will eventually rule South Africa. She assumes that blacks will emerge victorious from their struggle for political and economic justice, and whites will find themselves in a subordinate position, ruled by blacks. What is of more significance to Gordimer is the utopian vision of a democratic South Africa, led by the black majority, and the role South African whites would play in the new dispensation.

July's People, however, dwells less on the pending demise of white South Africa and on the utopia of an alternative future, and more on the difficulties that arise from the attempt to surpass the pitfalls of the old order in anticipation of a new one. The epigraph of the novel, culled from Antonio Gramsci, sets the tripartite timeframe of the narrative, "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." (*July's People* 12). The

past of South Africa is defunct however; attempts to transcend it towards a better future must face a period of interregnum.

As the civil war progresses pitting black revolutionaries against the racist white government of South Africa, the Smaleses find themselves in the same situation of deprivation. It is true that Bam and Maureen have sought to dissociate themselves from the extremes of apartheid, they treated their black servants decently, found the racist policies of white South Africa unacceptable, and even tried, to join "political parties and 'contact' groups in willingness to slough privilege it was supposed to be their white dog nature to guard with Mirages and tanks" (*July's People* 8). The Smaleses have striven to avoid the racist attitudes of the majority of white South Africans, but their attempts to overcome the color bar have blinded them to the economic component of apartheid. In fact, throughout the novel, they resist redistribution of wealth, seemingly oblivious to the fact that, before the revolution, the racial laws of apartheid tipped the economic balance in their favor. The conflict over the *bakkie*, a truck, which is the symbol of the Smaleses material wealth, betrays the limitation of their liberalism. It starts when July, without seeking their permission drives it and the Smaleses accuse him of theft and find it hard to countenance his claim on the *bakkie*. As long as July was obedient and vulnerable, they felt outraged by the racism of apartheid, but as soon as his relationship with them entails material equality, they resent him. In disbelief that July has contested his exclusive right to the *bakkie*, Barn complains, "I would never have thought he would do something like that. He's always been so correct" (*July's People* 58). The black man has overstepped the limits, he does not know his place any more. July's assertive claim on it is in line with the argument Gordimer makes in "Living in the Interregnum" a lecture that recapitulates some of the concerns of the novel. In the lecture, Gordimer urges white South Africans to give up sole possession of South Africa's economic wealth and institutions:

In the eyes of the black majority which will rule, whites of former South Africa will have to redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures. From the all-white Parliament to the all-white country club and the separate 'white' television channels, it is not a matter of blacks taking over white institutions, it is one of conceiving of institutions – from nursery schools to government departments – that reflect a societal structure vastly different from that built to the specifications of white power and privilege. ("Living in the Interregnum" 14).

The most jarring confrontation with the new reality is fully conveyed through Maureen. She is a creature of modern privilege who not only has been unaware of her special status but also has flattered herself with having a liberal bias. She fails to see the legacy of humiliation in her past interactions with July. The situation has changed now, and Maureen "and her family were fed by them, scoured by them, hidden by them. She looked at her servant: they were their creatures, like their cattle and pigs" (*July's People* 96). Unlike her husband, Maureen is constantly reflecting on his and her attitudes towards July and the extent of their implication in apartheid. Maureen's liberal views and her humane treatment of her servant before the revolutionary war do not go to the heart of the racist and discriminatory policies of white South Africa. They are cosmetic and leave intact the economic discrimination

of apartheid. Maureen and Barn do not object to the revolution, nor do they accept the racist policies of their nation-state. They treat blacks as equals and believe in their cause, but they are not ready to part with their possessions and privilege.

Gordimer makes it clear that sharing property is the litmus test for the white South African liberal position. It is not sufficient, for her, to sympathize with blacks, reject racism, and object to the policies of apartheid. In her essay "How Should We Look at Each Other Then?" she tries to stake a ground on which optimal relationships between whites and blacks should be constructed in a plural South Africa. In the same essay she disagrees with "those subjectivists who believe that a spiritual change of heart is the basis of peaceful resolution," and aligns herself with "the objectivists- who believe that the basis has to be economic conditions". She further goes on to say that, has no faith in the injunction "love one another or perish as a solution to the disparities between whites and blacks, because she doubts that you can love me while I have a full stomach and you are Hungry". Here Gordimer calls for "a politics that will nurture material justice before we can hope to live in peace. A new constitution, new laws must change the economic circumstances of the majority; healing can take place only on that honesty of purpose".

The Smaleses' three children, Victor, Gina, and Royce, bear the burden of a post-apartheid South Africa. The relationship Gina establishes with Africans defies the fears of racist whites of going native and rehearses Gordimer's passionate plea for a plural South Africa where whites are merely ordinary members of a multicolored, any colored society, freed both of the privileges and the guilt of the white sins of our fathers. Gina metamorphoses into an African girl, immersing herself in African language, manners, food, and perceptions, so much so that her new world has become the yardstick through which she perceives the rest of the world. The optimistic characterization of Gina is, however, counterbalanced by that of Victor. Through Victor, Gordimer shows that the transition to a post-apartheid South Africa will be tentative and fraught with challenges, and that one major part of that transition must include a new perception of ownership. Gordimer is fully aware that the induction of the white South African into an egalitarian economic system is not

going to be unproblematic or straightforward. However, although redistribution of wealth may be the most difficult utopian goal to accomplish, it must be envisioned.

July's People stands as a testimony to Gordimer's staunch commitment to a post-apartheid South Africa. It locates the origin of current impasses in a past of inequality and complicities, and sets its eyes on a potentially promising future that may break the unbearable deadlock of apartheid. Gordimer resists indicating the path in which post-apartheid South Africa may find salvation and refrains from speculating on the details of that future because it belongs to blacks more than whites to decide its content. But she does not shy away from discussing, the kind of role whites should fulfill in a prospective democratic society, constantly urging them to stop claiming privileges based solely on race and to remedy economic inequality by sharing property and skills with black South Africans.

July's People is a transitional work, a novel of the interregnum that has become a historical artifact as well as a classic of the postcolonial canon or counter canon. The handwringing of liberal white guilt that lies behind its concern, full of the ambiguity born in complicity, privilege, and pious sincerity, is an important component of a narrative from an embarrassing and tragic past. This novel that looks forward and warns about futurity is the case study of the entire white tribes pathological anxiety, a fear proven by the attempt to ban it terming it as deeply racist superior and patronizing. Like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Heart OF Darkness*, and *Things Fall Apart*, novels that over time have taken on mythic dimensions, some of the strange power of *July's People* comes from the potent blend of white guilt and white dread. While writers commonly grow less rebellious with age and fame, Gordimer has kept her faculty of revolt very much alive. Over four violent, tumultuous decades, she has emerged as the poet laureate of apartheid's morbid symptoms. Symptoms, which echo in writers all over the world whose visions, are informed by a restless idealism, lashing out against oppression determined not just to document society, but also to hasten its transformation.

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