

Voicing the Voiceless: Unraveling the Master/Slave Relationship in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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Abstract

This article examines the Master/Slave relationship in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* using stylistics. The novel is set in a village for the black people. July, the black servant, hides the white family, the Smales, from the black people. There has been a revolution against the white people and their apartheid system. The novel traces July's development in his relationship with the Smales. During the novel, we witness a major change in July's attitude towards the Smales. The old Master/Slave relationship has changed drastically. July seizes the tools of power from the white family. In this article, I'm going to trace July's development and how he has managed to shake the foundation of the Master/Slave relationship. Moreover, I'm going to follow a textual analysis of the novel using Michael Toolan's analysis of conversation in fiction. His analysis will count for the changes that occur for July.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Nadine Gordimer, July's people, subaltern, stylistics

1. Introduction

Apartheid government in South Africa has exploited, manipulated, and humiliated the Black citizens, though the Black citizens are the majority of the population. Nadine Gordimer, a white liberal writer, predicts the demise of apartheid in her novel *July's People*. Her humane commitment to the social, political, and economical sufferings of the Black people is obvious in her writings. She does not believe in "Art for Art's sake". In her book *Writing and Being*, Gordimer (1995) writes:

It is beyond dispute that no character in fiction, even if conceived as an ape, a beetle, a phantom, is without connection with real persons experienced by the writer within contact of sight, sound and touch, or second-hand through experience recorded by others in one medium or another, and whether or not the writer is always aware of this. (p.4)

Nadine Gordimer's admonition to the White liberals is direct and clear. The Black people will revolt if the apartheid government continues mistreating them. Gordimer uses the black servant July as a voice to counter the apartheid rule. In his article "The Subaltern can speak in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*" Mohammad Deyab (1981) asserts that "Gordimer argues for the ability of the disempowered subaltern to 'speak back' through the reversed relationship between July, the native servant, and his European master and mistress, the Smales" (p.5).

In this paper, I will unravel how the subaltern reverses the relationship and seizes power from the white master throughout the novel using Michael Toolan's analysis of conversation in fiction. In his article, Toolan has concentrated on the moves proposed by Deirdre Burton. These moves are: opening, supporting, challenging, bound-opening, and re-opening. In this paper, I'm going to concentrate on the challenging moves, because they will account for the tension between July and the white family. But I will stretch these moves to go beyond the scope of conversation where the indirect thoughts and the actions of the character can be seen as a move by the reader. In *July's people*, July says "You like to have some cup of tea? July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind has always done for their kind" (p.1).

The narrator wastes no time in setting the relationship between the master and the slave. July bends at the doorway, and serves the white family. The act of serving has been stretched by the word 'always', and also the word 'kind' gives the effect of distancing July from the Smales. But there is one thing missing from this stereotypical encounter between the white and the black. Deyab (1981) notices the absence of the word 'Sir'. He contends that "the subaltern July starts to have a voice that is no longer of servitude, but rather a voice of equality with his white master and mistress" (p.5). Dropping the word 'Sir' can be seen as a challenging move. July is breaking the social rules where the servant has to say the word 'Sir' to his master. He recognizes the absence of the Master/Slave relationship in their present situation. The voiceless begins though implicitly to have a voice. In his essay *Apartheid and the decline of the civilisation idea*, Paul Rich (1983) examines the disturbances that occur during the apartheid rule in South Africa. He considers the mistreatment of the black people at the hand of the racist white people at the core of all the problems in South Africa (p.3). The following quotation occurs in a conversation between July and Bam. "_ I tell them you give it to me. _ Bam blew laughter. _

Who'll believe that. _ _ They know, they know what it is happening, the trouble In town. The white people are chased away from their houses. And we take. Everybody is like that, isn't it?" (p.13)

July has told the villagers that the vehicle owned by the white family belongs to him. Bam is unable to recognize his present situation, and his only response is a laugh and a question. July's assertive answer to Bam is a challenging move. The repetition of the phrase 'they know' clearly shows that July is aware of the whites' weakness. The act of seizing the white man's car is another challenging move. The car is a symbol of power according to Deyab. He (1981) writes that "Gordimer endows July with some of these objects in order to empower him. This symbol suggests the power of mobility and economic exploitation of Blacks at the hands of Whites" (p.7). This challenging move by July shakes the Master/Slave relationship to his side giving him further empowerment. In addition to that, it asserts his voice as a medium of power. July's awareness of his new situation can be seen in the following quotation: "Her son who had seen the white woman and the three children Cowered on the floor of their vehicle, led the white face behind the wheel in his footsteps, his way the only one in a wilderness, was aware of something he had not known. They can't do anything. Nothing to us any more" (p.21).

The son here is July. He has seen the whites' weakness. The former image of the whites as powerful is changing now. The important word in the above quotation is 'aware'. The first step in any kind of liberation is awareness. July's awareness of the whites' situation takes a new shape. What I have referred to as the indirect thoughts of the character as a move is applicable here. Gordimer's empowerment of July takes many shapes. One of these shapes is the transformation of his thinking. The act of challenging the white man involves the subaltern's awareness of his new position. The ingrained Master/Slave relationship in July's mind is not going to change overnight. It takes time. And that's what Gordimer is doing. She is deconstructing the old Master/Slave relationship. In his book *On the Postcolony* Achille Mbembe (2001) addresses the issue of the subaltern's awareness of the changing circumstances. Mbembe argues that the first step towards the subaltern's freedom is awareness which will lead eventually to his freedom (p.7). In the following quotation, the Smales are gradually aware of July's changing attitude towards them: "All he could say to Maureen was that it was July. July. He's not around when did he get the keys? Oh, the other day. There was nothing to be remarked or reproached, in that, between them. He had been in charge on the journey, they were on his ground, here" (p.40).

2. The White Hegemony

July has taken the car without the Whites' permission. The repetition of July's name reinforces their helpless situation. Also, the repetition foregrounds July as a topic of discourse. He is in the minds of the white family. His challenging move represented by seizing the keys can be seen as stripping the white man from one of his power tools. This move empowers July in his new situation. The Master/Slave relationship has undergone a remarkable transformation. The whites are aware that they are not at home anymore. The one who is really at home is July. Here, we have an intense encounter between Bam and Maureen regarding their present situation:

By Christ you do. When it comes to 'frankness'. It all looks ridiculous. That's all. What d'you bloody want to do? Conjure up superman to bear them away? _Why don't you admit we were mad to run. Why can't you. What're you talking about? You wanted to get to the coast. only until he offered this. I can't stand your fucking rearrangement of facts. (p.46)

The couples, Bam and Maureen, are expressing their intense feelings of anger, grief, regret, and hopelessness. This kind of conversation is unlikely to happen between them in Johannesburg where they used to live. The exchange here can be seen as what Michael Toolan has called a 'conversational turbulence'. The use of obscene words emphasizes this turbulence. The conversation takes the form of challenging moves. As each challenging move succeeds the other, the degree of intensity is increasing. It is interesting to note that the challenging moves take the form of questions, Questions that are not meant to be answered. Posing this kind of questions indicates their refusal to take responsibility for their former decision to come to July's ground. Abdalradi Abu Jweid (2016), in "The Fall of National Identity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," claims that the mood of anxiety shakes the whites' position as Masters which will lead to the shaping of a new master (p.531). It is also interesting to note that the decision to go to July's village was made by July. One may argue that July has given the White family a proposal not a decision. Nevertheless, the act of proposing or deciding empowers July as the one who is in control of the situation. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) asserts the subaltern's ability to change his situation regarding his relationship to the other, and the aftermath of his new position (p.9). In the following quotation, July reinforces his new position as the Master:

Bam stepped through a minefield of words before he chose what to say. Who drove the bakkie? I got someone he's drive for me. One time he's working there in Bethal, for the diary, he's driving truck. He knows very well to drive for me. I'm bring paraffin, salt, tea, jam, matches, everything when it's stopping to rain you come with me, we fetch from down there. And he patted the car keys in his pocket. (p.53)

This scene takes place when July has returned to the village. The seemingly polite questions by Bam do exhibit tension and hostility. The first sign of tension is represented by a nonverbal gesture which is the act of not greeting July. Maureen's astonishment is striking, because she sees in her husband's face the old Master/Slave relationship. Bam begins his challenging move with question preceded by the word 'And'. The 'And' here carries the act of accusation. An accusation which July has handled very well. July's short answer deflates Bam's accusation. In the second challenging move, Bam struggles with his own language. His anxiety with the words reveals his weakness as an interlocutor. Also, Bam's hesitation reveals his discomfort with the upcoming conversation. He tries to use logic. Therefore, he uses his previous knowledge about July. That July can't drive cars leads Bam to his second challenging move. July's answer deflates Bam himself. It looks like as if July has prepared his answer in advance. He uses logic in his answer. He can't drive cars, but he has brought a trained driver. In the second part of his answer, nearly in the middle, he strikes Bam with an essential issue.

July has provided the white family with the necessities of life. In fact, he concluded his list with the word 'everything'. What is ironical here is that while Bam is talking about the car, July is talking about an important subject. July has been given the opportunity to establish his role as a master of conversation. His last answer is rather a lengthy one. He talks more than Bam. His answer, though with some grammatical mistakes, reveals his confidence and ease with the language. July's vocabulary expands beyond "orders given by Whites and responses made by Blacks" (Spivak, 2010, p.45). The language can be seen as a power symbol.

July has stripped the white man from his own language. This act asserts the Subaltern as a subject capable of countering the Master. July concludes his answer with a nonverbal challenging move which is the act of patting the car keys. He is demonstrating his power tools. The Master/Slave relationship takes an important turn in the above scene. The subaltern can 'speak back' with logic and confidence, and he also can pat the car keys in front of his Master who is helpless to do anything. In her article *Comparing Postcolonial Identity Formations: Legacies of Portuguese and British Colonialism in East Africa*, Susan Trovao (2012) emphasizes the role of language and conversation in building the postcolonial discourse. Language can be seen as a symbol of power, and it empowers the one who is more conversed especially if it is the language of the Master. Here, July further asserts his role as the Master. He talks more than the Smale:

Here. Here. He leaned forward confidentially using his hands. _ Is no good someone else is driving the car, isn't it? Is much better I myself I'm driving. If they catch you without a license.... He laughed. Who's going to catch me? The white police-man is run away when the black soldiers come that time. Sometime they take him, I don't know... No one there can ask me, where is my license. Even my pass, no one can ask any more. It's finished. I'm still worried that someone will come to look for us here because of the bakkie. The bakkie? You know I'm tell them. I get it from you in town. The bakkie it's mine. Well, what can they say? (p.55)

The apparent subject of the conversation is July's legitimacy of driving the car, but the underlying theme is the transformation of power relations. We notice that July speaks more than Bam. July's part of the conversation takes the form of argumentation. He argues for his new authority. The repetition of the word 'Here' emphasizes his awareness of the power relations. The place aids July in his argument. That's why he referred to it twice. Bam tries to shake July's position as an interlocutor by referring to the word 'license'. It is interesting to note the ellipsis at the end of Bam's sentence. His hesitation to complete the sentence affects his position as a participant in the conversation. Consequently, it is going to affect his position in the Master/Slave relationship. July's laugh represents his sarcasm at Bam's reference to the legal authority. He has made it clear that the white authority does not exist any more, and he even finishes his answer with the word 'finished'. By doing so, he cuts all Bam's hopes to reckon on the assistance from the white authority. In the second move, Bam uses the car as an evidence of their existence which may expose the white family to danger. If we can look at the car as a sign of the whites' existence, we can infer that July's use of the pronoun 'mine' has deprived the family from the mere existence. July has annihilated his interlocutor. This act empowers July in his relationship with white man. In the following quotation, July says:

Who will go to the shops to get things for you? Who can bring your matches, your paraffin. Who can get the food for your children? Tell me? She always took on the responsibility of assuming herself addressed; she was the one who understood him, the way he expressed himself. Of course. I'll bring them back to you. Tell me? Of course, yes of course. He looked at her, looked away. _ Tomorrow I'm go get medicine for Royce. That child he's sick. (p.61)

This scene takes place where July tries to get the car keys back. He begins by using the question pronoun 'Who' three times. The answer to his questions is more than obvious. July tries to lead his interlocutor to come up with one conclusion. The conclusion is that he is their only mean of life. It is interesting to note that July's interlocutor in this scene is Maureen. Earlier in the novel, the narrator comments on their relationship "Often Bam couldn't follow his broken English, but he and she understood each other well" (p.13). Maureen's understanding of July expands beyond his use of the English language. She understands his personality. The repetition of the word 'Of course' for three times can be seen as an attempt to reassure July that nobody is going

to mess up with his new authority: “July was instantly affectionate, playful, light and boastful with the boy. You lucky, you know your father he’s very, very clever man. Is coming Plenty rain, now everybody can be happy with that tank, is nice easy, isn’t it? You see, your father he make everyone-everyone to be pleased” (p.63).

In this scene, July is comforting Victor who is the oldest boy in Bam and Maureen’s family. Victor is angry, because the black children are drinking from the tank that his father has built. Therefore, July is trying to calm him down. July’s confidence with the English language is obvious in his lengthy speech. The adjectives ‘affectionate’, ‘playful’, ‘light’, and ‘boastful’ present July as a lovable character who is able to make children happy. The absence of the parents, Bam and Maureen, is striking here. It is July who is comforting the boy. He is assuming the role of the father who is able to understand his children and lead them to the right way. July’s speech poses a threat to the parents, and it can be seen as a challenging move. He has challenged the white man authority as a father. The Master/Slave relationship has entered a new stage. The subaltern is on his way to become the Master. In the following quotation, Maureen is seriously aware of July’s transformation unlike her husband Bam:

I’m getting worried. She knew his use of tenses. He meant ‘am worried’. You are hungry. I think you are hungry. She smiled with surprise; and suspicion. Why d’you say that? We’re not hungry. We’re all right. No...No. You have to go look for spinach with the women. The answer came back at him. I go. I don’t have to go. The present was his; he would arrange the past to suit it. (p.96)

The subject of the conversation is the last sentence. He is arranging the past to suit the present. Maureen stands as the biggest difficulty in his way, because he has worked for her for fifteen years. She is the one who has used to give him orders in the past. She stands as a reminder of his slavery. Therefore, he tries to humiliate her. He asks her to go and work with the other black women in the field. July’s attempt to subdue Maureen represents a challenging move. she counters his move with a refusal. Throughout the novel, I have found that Maureen is aware of July’s challenging moves. Her anxiety to cope with her new position is exemplified in “her inability to enter into a relation of subservience with him that she had never had with Bam”(p.101). We note that July while addressing Maureen uses the modal auxiliary ‘have to’ which expresses necessity. This necessity is vital for July to rearrange his past. He is the one who is giving orders now. The Master/Slave relationship is flipping over. In the following quotation July has started to use his own language to communicate with Maureen. Although she does not his language, she has understood him:

You stole small things. Why? I wouldn’t tell you then but I tell you now. My scissors like a bird, my old mother’s knife-grinder. Always you give me those things! Oh no, I gave you... but not those. I don’t want your rubbish. Why did you take rubbish? ... I said nothing because I was ashamed to think you would do it. You_ He spread his knees and put an open hand on each. Suddenly he began to talk at her in his own language, his face flickering powerfully. She understood although she knew no word. (p.152)

Nearly all Maureen and July’s conversations take the form of ‘conversational turbulence’. Gordimer encodes in these conversational clashes power struggles. Maureen is accusing July of stealing things. This act can be seen as an attempt to gain superior speaking rights. That is why she did not mention this issue while they were in Johannesburg. In her present situation, she needs to bring the theft issue in order to counter July’s challenging moves. The conversation escalates to the point of affecting July’s facial expressions “No no. No no. Hysterically smiling, repeating” (p.151). Here, the repetition of the negative response ‘No’ along with his hysterical smiles represent a hidden anxiety in his relationship with Maureen. He refers to the things which she has used to give to him as rubbish. By doing so, he reduces the impact of charity effects which stand as a reminder of his slavery. The last scene in the above quotation is very illuminating. He begins his sentence with the English word ‘You’, and he completes it with his own African language. By doing so, he is breaking up with his Master’s language. “A language which “was too poor to speak his mind” (p.97). In this scene, we are witnessing a breakdown in the conversation. The breakdown has come up to the surface at last which is the result of a long struggle with the Master and the Master’s language. July has showed his ability and readiness to become a Master. The reversal has completed its cycle. In my point of view, Gordimer has not intended to promote July to the level of becoming a master. She is advocating a kind of balance between the Blacks and the Whites in South Africa. The issue of July becoming a Master is not important. The important thing is that he is not the Subaltern anymore. In *States of Exception: Everyday Life and Postcolonial Identity*, Keya Ganguly (2001) explores the different shapes of the subaltern vision. Ganguly argues that the subaltern’s perception of reality has changed drastically in the postcolonial era. There has been a great change in comparison to the pre-colonial period (p.8)

3. Conclusion

In the long run, I hope to have shown some of the ways in which Gordimer have encoded the conversational clashes, the indirect thoughts, and the actions throughout her novel. Michael Toolan’s “Analysis of Conversation in Fiction” has helped me to decode Gordimer’s message. I have discussed that the speakers, especially July and

Maureen, have adopted various strategies throughout their conversation to gain superior speaking rights. Also, I have noticed that July has broken the conversational discourse by using his African language. I think that July has feared that the English language has reached the point of undermining his conversational goals.

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