
Apartheid of South Africa in Gordimer's *July's People*

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Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) foresees the inevitable collapse of White South Africa and the emergence of new political and social realities. In this novel the blacks in the South African police force refuse to arrest their own people, so public services were break down and riots occur in major cities, quickly spreading into the rural areas.

Gordimer assumes that blacks will emerge victorious from their struggle for political and economic justice. At the same time, Whites will find themselves in a subordinate position, ruled by blacks. This novel's epigraph shows the reader might expect in the course of events. Author quotes from *Quaderni del carcere* (1948-1951), the partial translation as *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (1971): "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms".

July's people draws a grim picture of South Africa in order not only to expose the social and economic consequences of apartheid, but also the degeneration. The English-speaking Smalese listen to the radio hoping for the best, but at the same time asking themselves whether they would even want to resume their former lives. They have never considered themselves part

of the Afrikaner society, have always deplored the apartheid system and once contemplated immigrating to Canada.

It would never occur to them that their treatment of the natives might be a form of condescension and that they share part of the blame for the state of affairs between the races. The Smaleses speak no other language but their own equally provincial in other ways. Despite the weeks of serious rioting in Soweto, Bamford downplays the impending crisis.

July's people opens with White South African Maureen and Bamford Smales in a shack provided to them by their former black servant July. The smalesses are professional liberals. Undoubtedly, there are other African whites who share these sentiments, but in this emergency, they do not seem important enough to give protection even to each other. Especially, Maureen struggles to remain true to her ideals. Yet she does not have the personality or the experience to relinquish her parental attitudes toward blacks.

Smales have escaped war-torn Johannesburg to the African bush where July is offering them shelter among his family and native people. Their new life is a far cry from and is starkly contrasted to the sumptuous life. They have led before the war undermined the props that supported their privilege. Bam and Maureen owned “a seven-roomed house and swimming pool” (25) and they could afford to hire live-in servants, went on frequent hunting trips, had “growing savings and investments” (8). But, by the time incongruously both and host, brings morning tea to Maureen and Bamford smalesses where they are sleeping with their children in a one-room mud hut with only a piece of sack cloth for a door. A small truck, bought for hunting holidays for Bam's fortieth birthday and they across six hundred kilometers only for a journey and it took three days and night.

In short, the above incidents show that they led a comfortable middle-class life. As the civil war, pitting black revolutionaries against the racist white government of South Africa, the Smalesees find themselves in the same situation of deprivation Africans have suffered for years that, without the most redimentary comforts of modern living.

The majority of White South Africans supporting and supported by a racist government had profited from the manichean(full of activity) world apartheid fostered. Given the economic benefits that accrued to whites as a result of apartheid. The political hegemony of the White South African nation state must also target the economic implications of its racist policies. An egalitarian South Africa can take shape only if whites recognize and act on the imperative to share with black's access to resources, skills and wealth.

In this novel, author gives special concentration on South Africans liberals because she considers their opposition to apartheid to be ineffective. As liberals, Maureen and Bam want to belong to a multiracial society. But, they hold on jealousy to their material possessions and privileges. They fail to associate their sumptuous life before the revolution with the racist policies of White South Africa.

July people does not show the Smalesees either as victims or villains; however as Nicholas Visser observes as, “the Smalesees are, to be sure, limited and those limitations are explored at length; nevertheless, the novel does not in any straight forward way condemn the Smalesees” (63).

The Smalesees 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. Infact, throughout the novel, they resist redistribution of wealth. Maureen and Bam's feeling about the revolution are mixed. It brings danger to them as privileged whites, but on the other hand it represents a possible end to the racist system they do not endorse.

The conflict over the bakkie (vehicle) start when July, without seeking permission of the Smaleses, drives it with the help of his friend Daniel, to the Indian store some forty kilometers from the village, where he buys groceries and other necessities. 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, they resent him. In disbelief that July has contested his exclusive right to the bakkie, Bam complains, "I would never have thought he would do something like that. He's always been so correct" (58). The blackman has overstepped the limits according to them. Smaleses admits that, "They had never locked anything, not even their liquor cupboard" (43).

It is true that July keeps the keys of the car with him, but he does not seek to steal the car from the Smaleses. Infact, he takes pains to reassure them that he uses the car for two main purposes; one to purchase groceries and other to drive with the help of Daniel. More than, that when they pay a visit the village chief, July, unbidden does not occupy the driver's seat, because it is Bam who does the driving.

But the sense of dependency involved in asking them is perhaps, what July's assertive act seeks to avoid. An index of his low social and economic status needs constantly to seek their

permission. His refusal to ask permission to use their car indicates his rejection of the Smaleses previous status as white bosses and a reminder to them that the old order is defunct.

Gordimer undercuts the Smaleses accusation that July has stolen their car by subtly questioning its validity. In her desperation to procure malaria pills for her children on their way to the bush and because of the anarchy caused by the revolution, Maureen loots a pharmacy. Through this act, she accepts that theft under duress may be justified. However, she does not apply the same moral relativism to July's perceived theft of the bakkie.

There is a profound irony that results both from Maureen's attempt to cast herself as the victim of July's theft and from her failure to recognize that her comment mercilessly captures her own forgetfulness of the origin of her wealth in the exploitation of blacks and their exclusion from the resources of their country. In addition, the novel makes it clear that the Smaleses safety and the integrity of their property in Johannesburg were guaranteed by state violence. Bam would find such a suggestion no less than obscene.

Maureen is constantly reflecting on his and her attitudes towards July and the extent of their implication in apartheid. On one occasion, she commandingly sends for July to come to her hut in an apparent attempt to replay the hierarchical structure that, "Go and say I want to see him" (68) July obliged it that obviously shows her ingrained sense of superiority over July.

The extent of Maureen's imbrication with apartheid is made even clearer when she recalls planning to visit July's village before the revolution. Here Gordimer shows Maureen to be detached from the material reality of Africans. She says, they drove everything and they want to visit July's family as their friend family. The condescending manner in which she imagines the

huts of July's village as quaint and his people focusing their gazes on her as though in awe of a divinity enables her to reify the village into an exotic but alien world. Absent from her vision of the village is its historical and economic dimension. Thus, what she takes to be an act of charity and a measure of her liberal beliefs simply reinforces her position as a white South African.

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

In *July's people*, Gordimer does not simply expose the apartheid condemned interracial relations. She equally envisions a future in which South Africans try to overcome their intractable social and economic problems. It must be immediately noted, however, that the post-apartheid era Gordimer foresees does not offer a full-fledged ideal commonwealth, for instance, in the tradition of Thomas More's *Utopia*.

The most obvious one can be found in the ending of the novel that, after July makes it painfully clear to Maureen in their final confrontation, where he berates her in his own language that even communication and understanding is impossible between them. Maureen finds her liberal views relentlessly put to the test. A Rowland Smith observes, "thus when she hears the loud noise of a helicopter, she magnetically gravitates towards it. She runs (160)". The novel ends here, refusing to tell what happen to her. That nothing about the helicopter indicates the

identity of the people in it, whether they are revolutionaries or white soldiers, whether they bring salvation or doom.

Stephen Clingman, recognizes the difficulty of identifying the message of the ending, “the circumstances in which Maureen’s running occurs ambiguous –but goes on to say that their significance surely is not...she is running from old structures and relationships, which have led her to this cul-de-sac (203)”. Since the present has proven impossible to reclaim from apartheid. But there is another chance that, in helicopter may contain black revolutionaries who may rape and or kill her than rescue and protect her.

Worn down by the strain of their situation and growing ever more resentful of Bam’s helplessness, Maureen is forced to reassess the most basic assumptions of her life and her willing. On the conclusion, she does not care about her husband and children and just want a chance to escape from the village.

It would not be the first time that Gordimer places the burden of initiating change beyond the deadlock of apartheid on white South Africans. Her refusal to define the outlines of postapartheid South Africa is consonant with the role she admonishes them to play in a new dispensation ruled by Africans.

Gordimer resists a white South Africa, critical of white oppression and white liberalism has suggested forcefully. In July’s people, she lives up to her belief that “the white writers task as cultural worker is to raise the consciousness of white people” (*The Essential Gesture* 293).

The Smaleses’s three children Victor, Gina and Royce bear the burden of a post apartheid South Africa. The lack of racial consciousness in her attitude towards them contrasts favorably

with the inequality that characterized the friendship of the young Maureen and Lydia. Although Maureen and Lydia as her best friends, their interactions could not completely evade the hierarchy of white and black. So naturalized and deeply rooted sense of the entitlements of her race that Maureen never questioned the propriety, the reason and the fairness of Lydia carrying her school case on her head from school to her home.

For Gordimer, white South Africans who must redefine themselves by accepting the values of the majority group in South Africa. Since they have chosen to make their home, they must equally assimilate its culture, language and values. She does not want to dictate to blacks the course of their struggle and the shape a post-apartheid South Africa should take. On the other hand she feels entitled to tell, often to dictate to other whites the proper terms on which they may fit in Africa. Through her writing, she wants to educate whites, informing them of the human and moral cost of apartheid and defining their place in a post apartheid society.

Works Cited

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