

## The Idea of Nation Building in July's People

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### Abstract

Nations are born and die; it changes its existence with the time. The world has witnessed a lot of constructions of nations. It's is so complex and problematic concept because all the process take place in mind. A Nation is built in imagination (Anderson 1991). It needs to be understood that a 'nation' could be without state. There are 156 official nation-states in the world but we don't know exactly how many nations are there in the world. The concept of State-building is less problematic. It could be done on papers and the new borders can be built, but nation building is complex. In 1981 South Africa was still chained under laws of apartheid. Nadine Gordimer constructed a nation in 'July's people', when it did not exist at the time of writing. The goal of this paper is to explore how the idea of nation has been (de)constructed in the transition from apartheid to a formation of new identity of post-apartheid nation in the novel 'July's people'.

**Keywords-** Nation-building, post-apartheid, identity, South Africa, Utopian/Dystopian visions

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### Introduction:

When whites came in South Africa, they built an idea of nation with the idea of civilization, against the threatened "barbarism" of Africa (Rich 1984). Gordimer shows the western notion of civilization and decline of this idea in modern South Africa. The idea of civilization gives a kind of legitimation to the act of colonialization. (It is like when you ask why did you bullied, so gets a reply that to make him civilized.) It is important to see the concepts of nation as it would be used further in the paper. Nation is a group of people who share identity and relate to each other. People feel a sense of belongingness. It's such a strong feeling that people are even ready to die for it. As Anderson (1991) suggests that the 'people of the smallest country don't know each

other, still they relate.’ This sense nationality is developed by creating an ‘other’. You cannot have only one nation in the world. In simplest words, nation is built by constructing a ‘they’. We find this ‘they’ is needed to show that we are other from them. So nation is a mental construct and because it’s a mental construct it needs a constant reminder. From Birth certificate to Passport, all play as an instrument of reminder.

This construction of national consciousness happens in the people’s mind. When a nation is in transition so there is a transition of the consciousness in mind. The mind goes through a conflict of identity. In the new nation-building, the internal conflict is about where a person finds himself standing, or a person could relate himself. This conflict is what we see in Africa; of becoming a new nation, transition from apartheid to post-apartheid and identity crisis. The novel captures this transition perfectly.

Nation building term is used for constructing the national identity by state. As Bhabha said *“nation are coming in being and we construct the meaning and symbol around in”*.( Bhabha 1990). In nation building, creating an identity is the main objective. So “nation-building” is a process which leads to the formation of countries, in which the citizens feel a sense of identity. The extensive efforts of nation building could be seen in France and Italy, where the state made national language and institutionalized it through schools.

Form apartheid, there was a transition towards creating a new nation or a nation building. South Africa was already a state with all laws. As Bhabha suggests that the concept of State-building is less problematic. It could be done on papers but the process of nation building is very problematic as it is all mental construct. For some it was difficult to relate to the new identity that is being constructed. This larger nation building is a conflict, which leads to the internal conflict in the lives of the people. ‘July’s people’ shows this transition towards nation building as a result of the social and economic consequences of apartheid and where the whites failed to understand the transition. They failed to adopt the new identity that is being constructed. They fail to understand or better to say they choose not to understand the transition because they wanted to stick around their economic and power positions.

Tecucianu (2014) called moving away from apartheid as Metamorphosis of Identity. When a nation is constructed, an existing idea of nation also has to be deconstructed. Gordimer deconstructs the idea of nations that whites had. She shows a process of nation building much it actually

happen. She destructs the nation where economic exploitation of Africans and the whites' political suppression continues, and creates a nation where power is shifted to Black.

As Erritouni (2006) argues that the novel does not create a full-fledged post-apartheid nation, but rather, it creates possibility of an equal co-existence between whites and blacks. It is just a possibility; the novel does not give a traditional ideal utopia, that everything is going to be perfect.

*“Gordimer deterritorializes some recalcitrant facets of apartheid and re-territorializes the space she empties out with fresh alternatives that anticipate an egalitarian post-apartheid South Africa” (Deleuze 1987)*

When a nation undergoes a transition, it does give effect. For example the effect of London's transition after World War in Virginia Woolf's novel Mrs. Dalloway. (Another e.g. when India and Pakistan undergoes the transition, from colonial to a formation of new identity of nation, crisis was observed and was also captured by literature). The case in 'July's people' is bit different from others as here Gordimer is projecting a future crisis. She has created a space of 'social hell' (for whites). She shows the power shift. For years how the lives of black used to be deprived, now it is going to be for whites as they would be deprived from their comforts. (Erritouni 2006)

'July's people' shows that when nation is transitioning, power dynamics also shifts. Now in the new nation blacks have the power and authority. It is a shift in economic, racial, and sexual power dynamic. July who was the servant is now has the authority. Even it Maureen and Bamford Smales, liberal whites who once were the masters of the July; are now bound to leave their home, money, and Johannesburg in the civil war and have to take shelter of the servant.

In transition, roles also shift. Both Smales and July understand this clearly. Smales know that July has taken their stuffs. Although these stuffs were not costly e.g. scissors, but it was taken without permission. However they are not in position to ask or question him. Similarly although July maintains his status as servant before them, still he knows that he has the authority. He time to time shows that, e.g. he uses his own language (when arguing) which gives a sense of authority. Use of 'bakkie' (that too against Smales' wish) also a metaphorically is a use of authority. Head (1994) says that Gordimer did continue to invest the discursive practices, however in the different context by focusing specifically on the "construction of individual

identity”. The nation which had created Smales’ identity was now ‘dying’. The possession of economic wealth is no longer in their hands. Now in changed scenario, even Bam’s children do not follow him, as they know that he is a powerless patriarch. Whenever a nation building takes place, there is a dislocation, physical as well as metaphorical such as is the dislocation of identity.

Well, the process of nation building is problematic and it tries to create a national identity. When people are not able to relate, crisis occurs. A lot of South Asian authors dealt with the crisis of nation building and its outcome through loss of identity, the sense of dislocation, violence and religious intolerance. The movement against Apartheid in South Africa was getting more violent after Sharpeville incident of 1976 when police was opened fired the protesters. Around 575 blacks were killed by 1977 in Soweto. (Graves 1997) When Gordimer was writing, the black movement and violence was on its peak.

Gordimer herself described in July’s people, “*Riots, acquiring of the headquarters of international corporations, bombing in public buildings*” and in support of Soweto, a march was called at Johannesburg but “*fifteen thousand protester were been stopped.*” (Graves 1997)

Apartheid officially came into existence after *Nation Party* came into power in 1948. There were certain laws that restricted basic rights of black. People were legally divided into four category, (1) Bantu or all black, (2) Coloured, or (3) white and (4) Indian. (Population Registration Act. 1950). Apartheid was an institutional policy of segregation, non-whites were not allowed to vote, to own land, to seek an education, or to hold certain jobs. The constant political, economic, social, cultural, physical, and sexual suppression finally lead to the revolutionary movement throughout the country.

Graves (1997) argues that the ending of the novel is referring towards the post-apartheid, but the author leaves the ending unclear and ambiguous. We know that “she runs” towards the helicopter, but where the future of post-apartheid nation lies is not known. A different kind of view was given by Shehabat (2012), who consider Maureen as a symbol of colonizer, who holds racist and economic positions, and act of running is “distancing her from the world in which she lived”. So it’s kind of distancing of those ideas that she symbolizes from the emerging nation. Well, this argument itself becomes problematic. On other hand, Erritouni (2006) is clearer about the future post-apartheid nation. If white South Africans fail to give up their authority and economic possessions, their future in the emerging nation would be like Smales. No matter if they fall under the category of ‘racist white’ who practiced Apartheid or the ‘liberal white’ who

dissociate themselves from Apartheid, voiced for racial equality and treated black people servants decently; both will have a dependent identity in the emerging nation identity. It will be black who will have the power.

In the end, although critics never reached to the conclusion what was the last scene of the novel indicate about the future, but Ruth Levitas has an interesting take on the ending, she argues that Maureen's run towards the helicopter can be seen as utopian, as a run towards a new identity, (Erritouni 2006) adds. Well it is interesting that the ending is not closed, so it keeps the doors open for the world of possibility. Gordimer perfectly captured the moments when a nation goes through a transition. A transition from an apartheid nation into a formation of new identity of post-apartheid. July's people constructs the idea of nation, 13 years before it actually become one. It examined the role of material resources, apart from Apartheid other suppressions. Gordimer explored different identities how they fail to merge in the new emergence of a nation.

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