

Search of Identity: A Study of Nadine Gordimer *July's People*

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Abstract

This research paper explores and analyses the apartheid-era identity problem that existed in South African society at the time of a violent political upheaval. Additionally, it highlights the social and political divisions that existed in South Africa's apartheid society. The purpose of this paper is to explore both the opportunities and the challenges facing the democracy of South Africa in the future. It emphasises racial unrest, violence brought on by the shift of authority to blacks, and the reversal of roles and duties. It also looks at how the image of the old binary oppositions, which persist in the present, has led to inconsistencies in the present. Gordimer portrays a condition of political deadlock between the removal of the old white supremacist administration and the development of black majority rule throughout *July's People*. Gordimer foregrounds her ideas on racial unity, which she believes is contingent upon a reinterpretation of identities within the new social and political forces, by utilising the uncertainties, worries, inconsistencies, and ambiguities that characterise the situation. While, she recognises the inevitability of the end of white rule, she is pessimistic about what the future holds for diverse races and their roles and duties in the evolving complex society.

Key Words: Identity, Apartheid, South Africa, Racial unrest.

Introduction

Nadine Gordimer is one of the most famous writers in the world. Nadine Gordimer was born into an affluent family in the city of Springs, in the province of Transvaal, South Africa, on November 20th, 1923. Nadine Gordimer was awarded the coveted Nobel Prize in Literature for her body of work. Her paintings, which span more than 50 years, show the pain and tension of apartheid in South Africa in a way that never lets up. The main topic of Gordimer's

book *July's People* is how white South Africans would be treated in a new political order set in an imagined future (1981). It is an apocalyptic story about a terrible time between governments, when a white couple, Bam and Maureen Smales, and their children run away from a revolution that takes away their power and status and find safety in the village of their black servant, July. The quote at the beginning of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, "The old is dying and the new cannot be born in this interregnum a huge variety of sick symptoms emerge," refers to the main character's severe anxiety, uncertainty, powerlessness, and loss of identity.

Nadine Gordimer wrote *July's People* in 1981, which was a few years before the end of South Africa's apartheid regime in 1994. The book is about a rebellion by black people against the white system of power. The Smales is a liberal white family, and their black servant, July, goes through a big change at the same time as South Africa's social revolution. The changes in the characters' points of view show how they are figuring out who they are. A phenomenological reading of the work is possible because of the detailed descriptions of how some of the characters look at the world from the inside and how they feel about it.

In *July's People*, the main parts of the characters are the themes of race, class, and gender, which are connected to each other. Each character's "here" in the story is affected by what race they are. There "here" is where they see things from. Throughout the book, each character's point of view and racial identity change. At the start of the story, July acts like a black servant, which is a submissive role in a white-dominated colony like South Africa. The upper-middle-class white Smales have hired July to work for them. So, their relationship is based on different hierarchies. At the time the novel is set in South Africa, race politics gave the Smales institutional authority and an economic and racial advantage over the Julys. At the start of the novel, the Smales have already relocated to July's village to escape the war precipitated by the dark revolution. However, they continue to adhere to the traditions and beliefs of "back there," the community where they had resided. All the Smales' interactions with July were still influenced by the hegemony of whiteness. For example, July lived in a separate but accessible room in the backyard of the Smales' townhouse. This system resembles the South African Bantustans, where black people were forced to dwell. The towns governed by whites were kept at a distance from the Bantustans, yet the Bantustans were highly dependent on them. In turn, the growth of the cities depended on the availability of

inexpensive labour. On a more abstract level, the hegemony of whiteness manifests itself in the Smales' perception of July and, more significantly, in what they fail to perceive.

The very act of naming someone carries with it historically weighted and powerful meanings that are vital to consider during the process of developing an identity. Those, who are calling for someone and those who are transporting them can figure out their whereabouts with the use of the person's name. Because July is referred to by the name that the Smales use, the reader is compelled to take the Smales' point of view throughout July's People. When he asks Bam about guns in the chief's house, the only time his tribe's name, Mwawate, is stated is for a moment.: "How many firearms do you have at Mwawate's residence? (...) Naturally, 'July' was a term used by Europeans; for fifteen years, they had no idea what the chief's subject was actually called." (Gordimer 1982: 120) The fact that "they had not been told" tells us a lot; they never thought to ask. In their eyes, July Mwawate has not been a person. Even though they know he has a different name, they still call him "the chief's subject" (Ibid.). It is almost a play on words, because "subject" in this phrase means "servant." Mwawate/July is seen as inferior by the Smales even though she is a subject, not an object, has a name, and is not only their servant. Also, the tensions of the apartheid regime's hegemonic framework are reflected in the twin names July and Mwawate. Dominic Head says that [July's] two names show that he has a split personality: He has a responsibility to populate his assigned rural town (as indicated by his African name), but he must be gone performing service, so he needs a name that whites may use (JP, 120). Both names are required by the system (since it requires two identities), and the fact that they are contradictory demonstrates how profoundly divided the regime's policies are. It has been shown that how people handle their spatial and temporal behaviours determines who they are (Head 1994: 126). July/identity Mwawate's formation is tied to the hegemonic mechanisms at work through the management of spatio-temporal behaviours, such as the naming procedure. The apartheid system needs July/Mwawate to be in two places and do two things: separate and control. So, according to the illogical logic of apartheid, he must have two names. Maureen is the English form of the Irish name Máire, which means "Mary." (Wikipedia) So, the character's name carries with it several meanings that are important to how he or she is oriented in terms of inheritance. The fact that her name means "Mary" in Irish shows that Ireland was one of the first places that the British controlled. This shows that her name, from the time she was born, carries with it the lasting

values of the centuries. Also, Mary, who is the mother of Jesus in Christianity, is the perfect Madonna. The colonialist way of thinking is based on the idea that men are better than women and that women only exist to meet men's needs. The Madonna archetype teaches men that they need a housekeeper and someone to take care of their children, so that they can have children and keep a stable, functional family while still being able to pursue their own interests. The Whore, which is the opposite of the Madonna, satisfies the sexual urges of men. The negative connotations of the Whore category set limits for the Madonna archetype in addition to controlling and limiting women's sexuality and the power that comes with it.

The embodiment of ongoing history

The actions of individuals are the embodiment of ongoing history. Ahmed argues that gripping an object “is an orientation toward the future insofar as the action also expresses a desire or purpose” (Ahmed 2007: 153). When a body reaches for and grabs an object on purpose, it moves itself and everything around it into the future. Ahmed also says, citing Fanon, that bodies can only do this work “given their knowledge of the world they occupy” (Ibid.). To be able to figure out where you are going in the future, you need to be comfortable with where you are now, or “here.” In *July's People*, July shows some independence by making up a story about how the car was a gift and claiming it as his own (Gordimer 1982: 59). After this, there is a scene where he starts to rearrange the Smales' sleeping hut: “(...) he started to push around the small, dark, crowded room, dragging and shaking things into a private order” (Gordimer 1982: 62). The characters and objects in July's village move around, and their positions and orientations change. July's personal order shows how he reaches for the stars and looks to the future. Referring to the work of Frantz Fanon, Ahmed says that “doing things” is not so much about natural ability or even preferences or habits as it is about how the world can be used as a space for action, a space where things “have a place” or are “in place” (Ahmed 2007: 153) July gets the world ready for action, his action, not theirs, the Smales' action, by putting things in place and following a secret order. Also, the word “private” shows the point of view. From Maureen and Bam's points of view, July's “shaking things into a private order” (Gordimer 1982: 62) makes them feel left out and puts up a barrier. “Private” sounds more like “locking someone out” than, say, “personal.” July might think of the order he creates as his own. As he starts to see his place, his “here,” as a person

in his own right instead of as a servant, he makes the world more accessible to himself. The Smales is bothered by July's actions and by their own, which have made him feel like an outsider. Even though they are on the other side of the mirror, they know the pattern. July's personal order is less stressful for him; it's how he gets used to the world as a place where things happen. In a world where colonialism and the rule of whiteness have been important throughout history, however, familiarity is also affected by its rhetoric. "The racial and historical parts of the body are below the skin," says Ahmed (Ibid.). This book also shows these historical and racial things. As July walks around the hut, they all feel a sense of "contempt and humiliation that came from their and his blood" (Gordimer 1982: 62). When you talk about a character's blood, you draw attention to what's going on underneath. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said says that the "othering" process always involves the "othered." "An archetypal sensation" in July's *People* illustrates how race and history play a role in the process of othering. Archetypal sensation between them, like the swelling resistance of a vein where an empty needle injects something against the flow of the vein's lifeblood; feeling so brutally shared that neither can experience nor be punished by it without the other. Until Pizarro convinced Atahualpa that it did exist, it was not real. It was made by Dingane and Piet Retief (Gordimer 1982: 62). Archetypes become more apparent as the characters' viewpoints shift. He fooled him by Pizarro, which started racially-based colonial strife in Peru. The characters' feelings bring up the original pattern of the situation. They both have the same feeling, but it's a violent one, so it can't be contained by a friendly relationship. In South Africa, the fight between Dingane and Piet Retief, which ended in death, is a good example of this problem. The pattern is breaking trust, and it has violent results. The betrayal is also a part of the process of "othering." By putting up a border and separating, "we" betray "them." In this act, the other's very existence is called into question, putting it at risk of going extinct. But borders are never fixed; they change as we look at them, just like the horizon. As people change the way they look, their limits and horizons change. In both Gramsci's depiction of hegemony and Ahmed's concept of continuous history, the idea of recurring patterns can be found. A "archetypal sense" of discomfort pervades the characters' bodies, which reflect the ethnic and historical origins of these patterns. Orientation involves the body and its environment; one could say that orientation connects them.

Racial Identity Perspective

In South African society, black and white identities have been devastated by the false meanings imposed and established by persistent racial fixation. At the social level, identity is culture, which is why politics and culture in South Africa are so linked. There is no easy way out of the South African crisis, away that can end enmity and prejudice. The whites and the blacks fail to reach a moment of final mutual recognition and forgiveness. The former masters are still overwhelmed by a clear inclination to power and pride that make them refuse the idea of social and political equality with the blacks. The blacks are also still governed by a sense of inferiority and insist to see the whites as colonizers and strangers. In this setting, Kathryn Woodward offers the following definition of 'identity' in her work titled 'Identity and Difference': Our identities give us information about who we are, as well as our relationships with other people and the society in which we live. Identity reveals both the ways in which we are others who share our viewpoint as well as the ways in which we are distinct from others who do not hold that stance.... Many times, identities are determined by contrasting two categories, such as man and woman, black and white, straight and gay, healthy and unhealthy, normal and aberrant. (1-2) According to Woodward, identity determines one's own being, how he sees others and how others think of him. It also tells whether one shares others the same feelings, behavioural patterns, personal characteristics and traditions or whether he is different. A group of people are gathered because they share specific characteristics, whereas others are marked out. Another important point here is that the idea of opposition is embedded within the concept of identity. And always one part of this opposition is favourably regarded by society, while the other is usually disapproved of. One's identity, being described as appropriate or inappropriate, is determined by the roles of society assigns for each member and also by how society expects one to act. This relates to what is called 'identity crisis'? In The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, identity crisis "occurs when the integrity of a person's SELF- IMAGE is threatened, disrupted or destroyed, usually in a conflict of loyalties or aspiration". It also occurs when one has a self-concept of himself in the past different from the present one. The paper avers that the revolutionary war depicted in July's People evokes a crucial crisis of identity that underlies the whites/blacks relationship and constitutes the pivotal theme in Gordimer's novel. In addition, "the revolution ends apartheid, but it does not face the crisis of identity. Both blacks and whites are entrapped in their historical roles. The apartheid policy of South Africa creates an irreconcilable hostility that weakens the possibility of making the dream of an emancipating identity unifying both

the blacks and the whites in one organic whole attainable. In *July's People*, the ideological conflict between the oppressive regime of apartheid and the different liberation movements, as well as the possibility of a violent revolution or ethnic cleansing, were all “morbid symptoms of the interregnum.”. The novel at the same time explores the possibility for the birth of a new order in which Gordimer's identity is challenged and impacted on by aspects of the Black Consciousness Movement. The epigraph is related to Gordimer's personal liberalism and her radical sympathies with the liberal values of the African National Congress and United Democratic Front. Thus, in *July's People*, she discusses the role whites will play in South Africa that is emerging after Black Consciousness. Katie Gramich has said that Gordimer “returns again and again to the utopian idea of a shared space, a place where people can meet and live together without the artificial fences put up by repressive regimes”. Despite a focus on revolution, liberal thinking and values are subjected in the novel to the most relentless scrutiny. There is ambiguity about the meaning of revolution as it is allowed to interpret it on at least two levels: revolution in its widest liberal sense as a radical culmination of justice, equality, liberty, and rationality, and on another level, revolution as an eruption into the kind of chaos and violence. Having these two levels of meaning means that Gordimer's narrative discourse can explore both these possibilities as a way of reshaping a new identity in a new order. Thus, the imagined revolution in *July's People* is a smart fictional strategy to unveil the crisis of identity embedded in the whites/blacks relationship. And Gordimer uses this hypothetical revolutionary context to put the whites and the blacks in confrontations to examine the possibilities of future reconciliation. *July's People* provides a tale about the people of July, the black South African servant whose name, as Abdul Jan Mohamed observes, “is drawn from a calendar and is reminiscent of Defoe's Friday” (“Friday”). 140) The whites are viewed as his people from the start, as well as the villagers' monsters. As the revolution converts July's owners into his gusts, the grammatical ambiguity of the novel's title symbolises their changed connection. According to Paul Rich, the novel is now: a study of the changing power relationship between whites and blacks as the structural foundations of white rule are removed, leaving the former white employers at the mercy of their servant July, who now has almost life-and-death authority over the fugitive Smaleses. (“Apartheid and the Idea of the Decline of Civilization,” 376). This apocalyptic vision is utilised as a warning prophecy to inquire about the options available to South Africans when confronted with imminent political transformation. The existence of whites in South Africa is

questioned in its entirety. White South Africans must redefine themselves considering the new order. Gordimer, in *The Essential Gesture*, further asserts this stating that, "...the past has begun rapidly to drop out of sight. Historical coordinates do not fit life any longer; new ones have couplings not to rulers, but to the ruled" (220). The metaphor of upheaval and chaos does not apply to the revolutionary activity of the radicals alone; it also applies to the upheaval in personal lives and relationships. Indeed, it is the upheaval in personal lives and relationships that Gordimer is preoccupied with. Although one is given a summary of the disturbances, one is directed almost exclusively to the upheaval and chaos in the household of the Smales and to the new changed situation and their relationship with July. For instance, the destruction of the means of communication indirectly puts pressure on the white protagonists and makes them live in continuous fear, always worried about their survival. Moreover, leaving behind the comforts of a middle-class life makes the Smales lead an anarchic life in the village and finally leads to the breakdown of their relationship. Here, Gordimer is seriously interested to show how the political and social stability of the whites breaks down. Katie Gramich makes a comment in this regard, stating that *July's People*: shows an abrupt and unwelcome sharing of space in South Africa, a moment when Maureen and July and everything they stand for "step across fifteen years of no-land... duellists men who will feel each other's breath before turning away to the required number of spaces, or conspirators who will never escape what each knows of the other." "*The Politics of Place: Nadine Gordimer's Fiction Then and Now*," page 84, "*The Politics of Place*" book. In *July's People*, Gordimer creates a metaphorical link between the system of apartheid in South Africa and the movement that led to its overthrow. This comparison is crystal clear when the Smales left Johannesburg amidst "the gunned shopping malls and the burning, unsold houses of a depressed market...the burst mains washing round bodies in their Saturday morning grab of safari suits, and the heat-guided missiles that struck Boeings carrying those attempting to take off from Smuts Airport" (*July's People*, 9). The imagery of chaos illustrates how the Smales' lives is turned upside down. They are no longer permitted to reside in their white neighbourhood with all its formerly enumerated benefits. The artwork depicts Eden deteriorating into hell. In *July's People*, the characters are constructed around the concept of race, which is intertwined with class and gender. Each character's perspective — the vantage point from which each character views, the 'here' — is influenced by his or her ethnicity. This racial identity shifts throughout the course of the story, much to how each character's

perspective shifts as the story progresses. At the beginning of the book, July's traits are (still) those of a black servant, which is a position of subordination in a white-dominated colony like South Africa. The Smales household, which is white and of upper-middle class, employs July in the role of maid. The racial dynamics of South Africa at the time the novel is set gave the Smales institutional power as well as a racial and economic edge over July. The novel is set in the era when the novel is set. Even though the Smales have already relocated to July's hamlet to escape the violence caused by the dark revolution at the beginning of the book, they continue to practise the rituals and adhere to the beliefs that they had in their prior community, which they refer to as "back there." Whiteness continues to influence all the interactions that take place between the Smales and July, including the fact that July lived in a separate room in the backyard of the townhouse, which was accessible but kept distinct from the Smales' home. This setup is eerily like South Africa's Bantustans, where blacks were compelled to reside. The whites kept the Bantustans separate from the cities, but they were very dependent on the cities. So, the cities' economies were based on the ability to find cheap labour. On a more abstract level, the Smales' view of July and, more importantly, what they don't see is a symbol of the hegemony of whiteness. Sara Ahmed says that "whiteness is an orientation" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 154). This indicates that the colonialist discourse and practises have become so ingrained in the lives of people living in the colonies that they orient themselves in the world under the constant influence of this hegemony, without fully realising it. This is the case even though these people are not aware that they are orienting themselves under this hegemony. Husserl, a German philosopher, is mentioned in Ahmed's essay *Ideas*. If we look at how the Body presents itself in a unique way and then do the same for objects, we find that each Ego has its own area of objects that it can see and that it sees them in a certain way. Things show up and do so from this or that side, and the way they show up has a permanent connection to this place and its main directions. (Ahmed 2007: 150) The fundamental orientations of "here" for each Ego or person depend on the spectrum of abstract or concrete items that can be observed by that individual. Depending on the culture in which a person grows up—race, class, and gender are all parts of culture—some things become obvious and others don't. Ahmed says, "The place from which the world unfolds is the body's "here" and "where," which it calls home. So, orientations have to do with how close bodies are to their homes (Ahmed 2007: 151). A white suburb where the Smales family lived under Apartheid is where they grew up. The month of July was both something they

wanted and something that helped them feel better. This keeps them from seeing the real-truth about their relationship and how he sees it from his point of view. Code takes on Bam and Maureen's and their liberal position's lack of care: It is a liberal position that employs the pleasant phrase "tolerance," which can too easily morph into apathy, especially when it comes to information. Tolerance is a liberal position that utilises the polite word "tolerance." It is founded on a great number of presumptions concerning "them" and the ways in which "us" and "they" are similar and dissimilar. Even though the white people are aware that they would not want to live as July does, they continue to presume that it is okay for him and believe that they have done a wonderful job of taking care of him. (Code 2011: 213). Until the end of the book, July's point of view is unclear and filtered through how other characters see her. Because July's "here" is mostly unknown, this stops the reader from seeing things the way he does. This, however, is not the only way to see things. There are different ways to look at a given situation. At the start of the book, July asks, "Would you like a cup of tea? — Just as his kind had always done for their kind, July bowed at the door and began on that day for them (Gordimer, 1982: 1). A simple physical movement, squatting, can be interpreted as a metaphor for July's twisting (the doorways of the mud huts are low). It can also be interpreted as a multi-layered emotional symbol of submission, depending on the context. On the other hand, it could also be seen as turning from a hermeneutic point of view. The main idea of the book is that things change and change shape, and that this has an effect on how things are interpreted. Consequently, figuring out whose interpretation of a particular circumstance is correct and whose authority should be invoked is critical. In July, the white Smales family, who are currently residing at his residence, begin their day. It is he who arrives first. July, in their eyes, serves as both their servant and host (Gordimer, 1982: 1). So, July is both a servant and a host; she is both lower on the totem pole and higher on it. Because they were all raised in a colonialist society, the Smales family and July have messed up ideas about who is in charge. They see the world differently depending on how they look at it. They also "bend" the world in different ways depending on what's going on around them.

Conclusion

In this analysis of *July's People* by Nadine Gordimer, the effect of various power structures on the perspectives and identity formation of the novel's primary characters is examined. When reading *July's People*, the idea of "Whiteness" figures out where you are in the world

is looked at and used to interpret the story. Specifically, the history of objects and bodies shown in the book, as well as their connections to whiteness and the “othering” process, are looked at. Moreover, the privileged perspective or position associated with whiteness as a narrative orientation is connected to pedagogical considerations. In addition, the importance of language and communication in the complicated process of identity building is emphasised. In conclusion, it is said that literature could play a liberating role in this process.

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