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Representation of Power Reversal and Post Apartheid Future: A Study of Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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Abstract:

Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* represents the reversal of power so far as the blacks and the whites are concerned in South Africa. The novel depicts a horrendous scenario about the effect of a brutal upheaval by the blacks on the everyday life of a liberal white family. In the context of colonialism and racism in South Africa, the novel explores how power reversal affects the refugee Smales in the village of July and how this power reversal metaphorically signifies the remaking of history of decolonization in South Africa. *July's People* contains both a dystopian critique of apartheid South Africa and utopian projections that anticipate a more egalitarian post apartheid dispensation. A full-fledged post apartheid South Africa is not imagined in the novel; rather, the novel adumbrates possibilities for a more equal co-existence between blacks and whites. If apartheid, with its policies of racial segregation, tipped the economic balance in favor of whites, a post apartheid future where whites would remedy the economic disparities between them and their fellow black South Africans is envisioned in the novel.

Keywords: Apartheid, Post-Apartheid, Power-Reversal, Decolonization, Race

Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* was written in 1981 when apartheid was still part of everyday life in South Africa. The novel depicts a horrendous scenario about the effect of a brutal upheaval by the blacks on the everyday life of a liberal white family. Bam and Maureen Smales, the Smales are a suburban, upper middle class white family living in South African tumult and war forces them to break away from their home town. Revolutionary black armies in Soweto and other areas of South Africa revolt against the government and the white minority through attacking the radio and television stations, and setting their homes on fire. The Smales want to get out hastily. Their black servant July offers to guide the victim family to his remote village. The Smales, having no other alternative, accept July's offer and run in swiftness and bewilderment to the village of their black servant. The Smales know little of the severe adjustments they would have to make in order to live on in July's rustic village. The adjustment of Bam and Maureen to the new existence soon threatens their relationship with one another on one hand and their family's structure on the other hand. The novel explores the dreadfulness and fright experienced by the Smales in the worsening circumstances. In fact, conflict arises mostly with Maureen when she realizes that her position is altering for power reversal.

The Smales have to get used to a new uncomfortable way of living in the abode of July's rustic community and learn to live like the black people. The novel depicts the new everyday existence of the Smales in a rural black community and compares it to their life 'back there' in Johannesburg. The difference between life in the city and life in a rural community is astonishing. The manner in which the power struggle between the Smales and their black servant July evolves is one of the most significant developments in the novel.

The analysis that follows draws most of its critical perspective from Abdul Karim Ruman's article "Power, Colonization and Racism in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*" (2013) and Ali Erritouni's article "Apartheid Inequality and Post Apartheid Utopia in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*" (2006). Ruman states that Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* represents the reversal of the colonial and subsequently the racial power play in South African context whose history till 1990s was a chronicle of racism, violence, bloodshed, slavery, oppression and exploitation of the black natives by the white colonizers. In the context of colonialism and racism in South Africa, the novel explores how power reversal affects the refugee Smales in the village of July and how this power reversal metaphorically signifies the remaking of history of decolonization in South Africa. The dislocation of the Smales to July's village and their dependence on July as their defender represents power reversal that suggests a dialectical collapsing of the former position of dominance of the Smales and July's previous position of subordination.

The relationship of dependence, defiance, communication and miscommunication is implied by the relationship of Maureen and Bam Smales with their black servant July. This relationship also represents the broader racial, economic and sexual power dynamics underscoring white apartheid rule and the resistance to it. In other words, the master-slave relationship translates or maps onto comparable relationships of power. "From Marxist point of view, a culture or race is determined to be 'powerful' in terms of money and the material possessions, and a race/culture having less material possessions is exploited by the race/culture having more material possessions" (Ruman 9). Thus, economic distinction creates class division and the inevitable power struggle arises. In this context, the whites are greatly stunned at the adverse situation where they have lost their powerful position as colonizers, and are trying to adjust with this power reversal.

As the power shifts, the former masters and the former servant rethink the structure of the relationship and the Smales confront their most basic assumptions about the way that the blacks and the whites should interact as far as the power reversal is concerned between the blacks and the whites in South Africa. In this regard, a paradoxical mingling of 'continuity' and 'change' in order to introduce the Smales' unsettling immersion into a foreign class structure is employed by the novel. The setting changes: an abrupt transition between "the knock on the door" and the non-equator that follows ("no door") not only foregrounds the correspondence between place and the formation of identity, but also introduces the power reversal that characterizes the new dependence of Bam and Maureen upon their black servant July. In other

words, whereas the “master bedrooms” of Johannesburg provide a setting in which tBam and Maureen exercise power over July, the dislocation of Bam and Maureen to July’s village suddenly invests July a degree of power over them and yet July’s broken English, “You like to have some cup of tea” (*JP* 1) underscores the language barriers that somewhat limit his recourse to power.

There is an idea of having a reciprocity or mutual dependence between master and slave; rather than a blanket opposition of dominance to subordination among the many implications of the master-slave dialectic. The slave ironically shares in the master’s power, because the master defines himself only in opposition to the slave. “According to Hegel’s parlance, the ‘thesis’ of the Smales and the ‘antithesis’ of July are merged into a ‘synthesis’ in which both fashions depend upon each other for the formation and legitimization of identity” (Ruman 9). The master-servant relationship and its complicated systems of dependency and complicity thus function perhaps as a metonymy for broader power struggles that can’t be ‘displaced’ or mapped onto other contexts – namely the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the white and the black, and the like.

Bam and Maureen lose their self-image as independent, gracious, powerful and liberal citizens after power reversal and consequently the material deprivation and difficulty of adjusting to dependency on their former servant July. Bam and Maureen lose a sense of each other as husband and wife; then they lose their sense of personal identity. Bam changes from active and powerful to passive and defeated. Likewise, Maureen, opts for a radical rejection of her current position through her dash for the “helicopter” (symbol of revolution and escape), leaving her family behind and forgetting her responsibilities to them after several unsuccessful attempts to create a sense of place for herself in the African village. Bam feels disoriented and disturbed regarding displacement of power. But Bam tries to cope with the situation better than others. In contrast, Maureen, the most miserable victim of disorientation, is unable to leave her racial trait that resides inside her. However, feeling alienated and uprooted, both Bam and Maureen always feel a sense to escape from this degrading and reversed status.

Thus, Bam and Maureen react to their situation in extreme ways. The most radical adjustment in which Bam and Maureen have the greatest trouble in accepting is their newfound subservience to their black servant July. July has become their host, their savior, and their keeper. July takes advantage of the situation when he realizes the power he now holds. Bam and Maureen are extremely frustrated over their loss of superiority and control, and their true racist views are uncovered and made far more obvious than when they used to live in the city. Bam and Maureen remain subservient and have almost no influence on the villagers despite the fact that they are the most intellectual people of the black community in which they now live.

According to Foucault when power corrupts and shifts, it affects human psychology, and sometimes it is used as a means of oppression and resistance/vengeance. In the novel, it is apparent in July who uses and abuses his power in different circumstances. It is as if the power reversal

has emerged for him as a reward of oppression, degradation and subordination of the blacks by the whites for hundreds of years. Numerous objects represent power in the novel. The novel depicts Bam's gun and the bakkie (truck) and its keys as objects that represent power. The Smales family owns these objects in the beginning of the novel, and as the plot develops, July and other blacks assume ownership of these objects.

In the novel, the characters are forced to negotiate new ways of relating to one another, and narrative makes the use of the awkward communication between the whites and the blacks that result from a new power-structure and the language barrier between them to illustrate the discomfort of that negotiation. The moment to ask July for the keys is let pass by Maureen. The power reversal is evident from July's assertion of self-power regarding the bakkie:

If they catch you, without a licence. He laughed. – Who's going to catch me? The white policeman 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 licence. Even my pass, no one can ask any more. It's finished (*JP* 59).

The conversation becomes extremely difficult between Smales and July after July laughs, and talks about how he is not capable for vehicular infractions because there is no longer any white system of authority to stop him. Thus, the keys symbolize the reversal of power so far as the blacks and the whites are concerned in South Africa. The keys of the bakkie (vehicle) initiate the new power structure. July makes it clear that he is in possession of the power, or capable of being in possession of something which amounts to the same thing. The keys and the bakkie are July's if he wants them to be, though he returns the keys to Maureen at the end of this exchange. By the time July returns the keys to Maureen, the novel makes it seem as though July is lending the bakkie to the Smales for the time being.

Bam gets angry on discovering that July has taken the bakkie without his permission. Deprived of his last and most potent means of male authority, Bam drifts into a maternal role: not loving one, but detached one. Bam starts giving the children food. A sense of detached resignation is created by the silence with what Bam performs his motherly duty, almost as if Bam is mourning for his manhood. Maureen after renouncing all her motherly responsibilities, experiences an, "explosion of roles" (*JP* 117) and she loses her rational faculty being unable to make sense of her life or to adapt to the new existence in the village. When the helicopter arrives, Maureen is certain only that she is tired, filthy and helpless and in the absence of any meaningful identity she runs.

Another significant event in the narrative is the visit of Bam and Maureen to the Chief of July's community. Bam thinks that the Chief is going to expel him and his family from the black community in which they have found refuge, but decides against telling his wife or family in order to keep them calm. When July introduces Bam to the Chief he says, "Chief, this is the master," (*JP* 111) an expression which the Smales absolutely hate. This is another reference to

the sudden reversal of power and reversal in the relationship between the Smales and July that happens because of the trip to the Chief. The meeting is in fact over the gun, which is still another possession of the white family signifying power that is soon to be lost by it and gained by the blacks.

A few days later, Bam's gun is stolen from its hiding place in the hut. Maureen becomes angry and leaves her husband in the hut to go and inquire about the theft. Maureen finds July near the bakkie and argues with him that Daniel, one of July's friends must have taken it. July claims to know nothing about the gun or Daniel's whereabouts, but finally breaks down and tells Maureen that Daniel left to join the black army a few days earlier. The Smales are stripped of last of their possessions and they wonder if this feeling of worthlessness and inferiority is something that July, his people, and the entire black race have been experiencing all along. Unlike her husband Bam, Maureen, is unable to control her feelings and emotions in reaction to the situation. All authority and power, symbolized by the bakkie and the gun, gets transferred to July's people by the end of the novel. As a consequence of this, Bam weeps only in front of his children and, he and Maureen interact, "as divorced people might" (*JP* 140). Their relationship becomes one composed of indeterminate pronoun, "Her. Not 'Maureen'. Not 'His wife'" (*JP* 105). Maureen goes to July and demands that he should return the weapon.

The powerlessness of Smales is evident from July's statement to his people, "They can't do anything. Nothing to us anymore" (*JP* 21). Maureen cannot adapt as well as other members of her family with the new environment and starts losing her mind. Bam and Maureen are bound to the village by the restrictions of the events surrounding them; for example, the bombings, the riots, and the fires. Likewise, July is also disgusted and bored with Smales towards the end. As he protests against Maureen's suspicion of his counter-revolutionary people about the missing of the gun, which used to be the emblem of colonial rule and power:

I must know who is stealing your things? Same like always. You make too much trouble for me. Here in my home too. Daniel, the Chief, my-mother-my-wife with the house. Trouble, trouble from you. I don't want it anymore. You see? – His hands flung out away from himself (*JP* 151).

According to Foucault, "when power is inverted, it greatly affects the psychology of those who exercised or manipulated it before; and on the other hand, those who achieve it newly at the cost of blood are willing to use it as a means of revenge for their lifelong suppression by the former's part" (Ruman 12). Thus, the novel brings about the fact that power corrupts irrespective of race or creed.

As the dislocation of Smales to their black servant July's village and the dependence of Smales on July as their protector symbolizes a reversal of power suggesting a dialectical collapsing of the Smales' previous position of dominance and July's former position of subordination, Ali Erritouni argues that *July's People* contains both a dystopian critique of

apartheid South Africa and utopian projections that anticipate a more egalitarian post apartheid dispensation. The failure of white South African liberals to recognize that their material well-being owes a great deal to the discriminatory policies of apartheid is chiefly criticized by the novel. A full-fledged post apartheid South Africa is not imagined in the novel; rather, the novel adumbrates possibilities for a more equal co-existence between blacks and whites. If apartheid, with its policies of racial segregation, tipped the economic balance in favor of whites, a post apartheid future where whites would remedy the economic disparities between them and their fellow black South Africans is envisioned in the novel.

Although the novel is not a traditional utopia in the sense that it prescribes an ideal commonwealth, it nonetheless contains utopian projections that adumbrate the proper form of racial interactions should take place in a post apartheid South Africa. The utopian impulse in an effort to indicate possibilities beyond the impasse of apartheid and to affirm the principle of hope is deployed by the novel. Yet, the future is not mapped out or a full-fledged social order is not imagined in the novel. The utopian horizon that the novel offers belongs to the kind of utopian narratives Somay describes as “open-ended,” (26) and Wegner sees as presenting “an emerging space” (17). The novel’s recourse to utopia, most notably at the end of the novel, stems paradoxically from the realization that South Africa under apartheid had degenerated into a dystopia. For as Kumar observes, “utopia and anti-utopia [dystopia] are antithetical yet interdependent” (100). Most commonly he adds, “the anti-utopia [dystopia] appears as the existing contemporary society, to which the author offers his utopia as the solution to present ills and discontents” (Kumar 105). *July’s People*, as a dystopian novel, draws a grim picture of South Africa in order to not only expose the social and economic consequences of apartheid, but also to open up utopian horizons beyond it.

The novel imagines the unavoidable collapse of white South Africa and the coming out of new political and social realities that would require white South Africans to mode the outline of a new identity. The question that the novel raises is not so much who will ultimately rule South Africa. The novel assumes that blacks will emerge victorious from their political and economic injustice, and whites will find themselves in a subsidiary position, ruled by blacks. The utopian image of a democratic South Africa, led by the black majority, and the role South African whites would play in the new dispensation is of more significance to the novel. 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.” The past of South Africa is redundant; however, endeavor to transcend it towards an enhanced future must face a recalcitrant interregnum.

The plot of the novel is situated in a dystopian future in order to warn of disastrous consequences if the economic exploitation of Africans and the political domination of Afrikaners that apartheid has instituted, continue unabated. “Yet, the revolution, the disruption of social structures, the impasse in interracial interactions she portrays had been evident in white South Africa as early as the fifties, and in a more sustained fashion since the Soweto uprising in the

seventies” (Thompson 212-13). The white South Africa Gordimer writes about in *July's People* is, “already so far anti-utopian [or dystopian] as to require little in the way of futuristic elaboration” (Kumar 110).

Bam and Maureen have hunted to separate themselves from the extremes of apartheid: they treat their black servant graciously, find the racist policies of white South Africa undesirable, and even attempt, though fruitlessly 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” (*JP* 8). From the history of apartheid the wealth and easy life of the whites owes a great deal to the policies of the South African nation-state under white rule. The majority of white South Africans have been benefitted from the racist policy of apartheid. The economic benefits given to whites as a result of apartheid, Erritouni argues, Gordimer believes that attempts to undermine the political hegemony of the white South African nation-state must also aim the economic implications of its racist policies. A classless South Africa can take shape only if whites become acquainted with and act on the imperative to share with blacks access to resources, skills, and wealth.

Gordimer, in many of her novels, essays, and interviews, exposes the imbrications of white South Africans, including the liberals, with the racist policies of their nation-state. Gordimer is especially critical of South African liberals because she considers their opposition to apartheid to be ineffective. Maureen and Bam as liberals want to belong to a multiracial society, but, as Erritouni argues, they hold on jealousy to their material possessions and privileges. Bam and Maureen fail to associate their sumptuous life before the revolution with the racist policies of white South Africa, and seem unaware that, in the words of the African National Congress, of which Gordimer is an active member, “the institutions, laws and practices of apartheid are basically extra-economic devices to secure the processes of capital accumulation through the maintenance of the black majority as an easily exploitable source of cheap labor power” (qtd. in Wolpe 30). The wealth of white South Africans cannot, therefore, be disconnected from the structures of racial discrimination erected by apartheid.

Bam and Maureen strive hard to avoid the racist attitudes of the majority of white South Africans, but their attempts to overcome the color bar blind them to the economic component of apartheid. In fact, throughout the novel, Bam and Maureen 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 capitalist ethos that property is inalienable informs their economic views. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer puts it, “Struggling unsuccessfully to maintain the rights of possession, the Smales couple manifest the ‘morbid symptoms’ of a dying consumerist culture in which identity is created by ownership and relationships are mediated by objects.” With “a psyche shaped to the specifications of Western consumer capitalism,” (109) Smales refuse to share one of the last vestiges of their life under the ancient regime, namely the bakkie, their vehicle.

The conflict over the bakkie starts when July, without seeking the permission of the Smales drives it with the help of his friend Daniel. The Smales accuse July of theft and find it hard to endure his claim on the bakkie. Their reaction to July's assertive use of the bakkie betrays the limitations of their liberalism. As long as July is obedient and vulnerable, they feel 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, Bam complains, "I would never have thought he would do something like that. He's always been so correct" (*JP* 58). The black man has overstepped the limits; he does not know his place anymore.

It is not significant to note that the Smales are irretrievably to be deprived of the bakkie but July contests their exclusive right to it. It is true that July keeps the keys of the bakkie with him, but he does not seek to steal the bakkie from the Smales. However, the Smales continue to insist that July has stolen the car from them with an ingrained capitalist mentality and a failure of imagination. July's assertive claim on the bakkie 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 (264-65).

Gordimer does not expect that whites will readily share power and property. If need be, "a more equitable distribution of wealth may be enforced by laws" (265). But in the anarchy of interregnum, July becomes a law unto himself.

The Smales protest that they would have willingly lent the bakkie to July if he had simply asked them. An index of the low social and economic status of July when he used to work for the Smales was his need constantly to seek their permission. His refusal to ask for permission to use the bakkie indicates his rejection of the previous status of Smales as white bosses and a reminder to them that the old order is obsolete. With the, "explosion of roles" (*JP* 117) that the revolution has affected, July now imposes his demands and wishes.

Unlike Bam, Maureen is constantly reflecting on Bam's and her attitude towards July and the extent of their implication in apartheid. However, Maureen's liberal views equally show cracks under pressure from the uncharted world of the interregnum despite seeing through Bam's liberalism, and despite her self-examination. In one of the incidents Maureen with authority

sends for July to come to her hut in an apparent attempt to replay the hierarchial structure that characterized their relationship in Johannesburg, “Go and say I want to see him” (JP 68). When he appears without any sign of having conceded defeat, “her little triumph in getting him to come turned over inside her with a throb and showed the meanness of something hidden under a stone” (JP 68). What is hidden is obviously her ingrained sense of superiority over July. Understanding well the hierarchial nature of their relationship, July refuses to concede that they are equal – a recognition she is anxious for him to admit. While she pleads, “When did we treat you inconsiderably – badly? I’d like to know, I really want to know” (JP 71), he insists on calling himself “her boy,” and calling Bam, “the master,” “as if there were no term to replace them, none that would express exactly what the relationship between them and him was, for him” (JP 111). July willfully refuses to relieve them of the guilt of being white South Africans by collapsing the division they have insisted and prided themselves on maintaining with racist whites.

Maureen’s liberal views and her benevolent 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 superficial and leave intact the economic discrimination of apartheid. Through the Smales, Gordimer criticizes the liberal view, in the words of Harold Wolpe, “that the racial order is essentially a political/ideological phenomenon. It originates, and is reproduced, outside the modern industrial or capitalist economy” (25). Maureen and Bam 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. This disjuncture between the Smales’ political and economic views accounts for their instability to understand the nature of July’s claim on their bakkie.

Gordimer makes it clear that sharing property is the test for the white South African liberal position. It is not enough, for her, to sympathize with blacks, reject racism, and object to the policies of apartheid. In “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. 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 – among whom I numbered – who believe that the basis has to be economic conditions” (144). 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” (145).

In the novel, Gordimer does not merely expose the impasse to which apartheid condemned interracial relations. She equally foresees a utopian 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 anticipates does not offer a full-fledged ideal commonwealth, for instance, in the tradition of Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Hers is a postmodern utopia that avoids recommendations and contents itself with adumbrating fresh possibilities. In

fact, Gordimer's use of the utopian impulse is consonant with Fredric Jameson's attempts to align utopia with the postmodern rejection of prescription, teleology, and naive optimism. Jameson argues that, "authentic utopia" is seldom prescriptive, serving, instead, as a beacon that points the way but isn't itself a harbor – the ultimate destination. It does not spell out the outlines of freedom; rather, it anticipates freedom. It does not lay claim to the future: it merely intimates it. As Jameson remarks:

The ideals of utopian living involve the imagination in a contradictory project, since they all presumably aim at illustrating and exercising that much-abused concept of freedom that, virtually and by definition and in its very structure, cannot be defined in advance, let alone exemplified (385).

According to this definition, utopia is neither apocalyptic nor dogmatic; it rejects prescription and teleological imaginative history.

Echoing Jameson, Pordzik argues that postcolonial novelists, including Gordimer, belong to a recent group of "utopographers" who have rebelled against the prescriptive closure of, "classical utopian novels." As a reaction against classical utopia, postcolonial novelists imagine, "a more complex and open-ended utopia locus encompassing all those possibilities of change that have not been fully realized". Thus they are, "hardly ever prescriptive in their conception of a better society" (Pordzik 16-18). The novel contains many layers of utopian projection that accord with Jameson's and Pordzik's definition of utopia. The most obvious one can be found in the ending of the novel. After July makes it clear to Maureen in their final confrontation, where he rebukes her in his own language, that even communication, let aside understanding, is impossible between them, she finds her liberal views persistently put to the test, and her faith in them irreparably destabilized; as a result, she reaches an impasse as Rowland Smith observes. Thus, when she hears the loud noise of a helicopter, she magnetically gravitates towards it, seeking it out, where it has landed beyond the river, and, "runs towards it. She runs" (*JP* 160). The novel ends here, refusing to tell the reader what will happen to her. 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, or whether Maureen has reason to welcome or dread them. Even its exterior adds to its mystery, "She could not have said what color it was, what markings it had, whether it holds saviors or murderers; and – even if she were to have identified the markings – for whom" (*JP* 158).

Critics have pondered over the ambiguous meaning of the last scene of the novel without reaching an agreement as to its exact meaning and the nature of the future it foresees. Stephen Clingman, for instance, recognizes the difficulty of identifying the message of the ending, "the circumstances in which Maureen's running occurs are 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 his cul-de-sac" (203). Since the present has proven impossible to reclaim from

apartheid, the only egress that is left for Maureen is the possibility of change that the helicopter promises. Unlike Clingman, Nancy Bazin holds that, “Maureen’s impulsive attempt to escape is more likely to be self-destructive than liberating” (124). Bazin contends that, “the people most likely to exit from the helicopter are black revolutionaries who, under the duress of a revolution, would be more likely to rape and/or kill her than rescue and protect her” (124). Visser argues that the last scene prefigures a future South Africa whose outlines are undefined, and that it contains a, “Utopian vision – a future projection intimating a realm of possibilities beyond the interregnum” (66).

Despite the limitations of their views, Clingman, Bazin, and Visser recognize the utopian dimension of the novel. Smith, on the other hand, finds that Maureen’s running while revealing, “a total inability to live with the present,” leads only to a “traumatic impasse,” “a deadlock” (145). Behind Maureen’s daring dash, her “running from old structures and relationships,” in the words of Clingman, there may lie a desperate effort at seeking out a new identity, one that is different from the liberal identity she has cultured under and in antagonism to the political and social arrangements of apartheid. It may be triggered by her belief that the future, uncertain as its lineaments are, contains utopian alternatives more appealing and potentially more practical than the interregnum. Moreover, it is important that of all people anticipating the helicopter it is Maureen who seeks it. Her run signifies Gordimer’s belief that it is incumbent on white South Africans – more so than blacks – to take a leap of faith and embrace the unknown future.

Gordimer identifies in the novel some of the impasses, the “morbid symptoms,” of the interregnum, but she neither clearly points in the ending to the means of transcending them, nor does she find them hopelessly impossible to remove. Her refusal to define the outline of post apartheid South Africa is consonant with the role she reproaches white South Africans to play in a new dispensation ruled by Africans. Gordimer has always criticized liberal whites for presuming to prescribe for blacks the right social and political order. Therefore, it should be anticipated that she would live up to her own injunction in her writing. The ending of the novel is utopian, an evading conclusion and adumbrating the possibility of a world beyond the interregnum, but it resists revealing the meaning of this horizon because Gordimer refuses here to recommend for South Africans, white and black, the shape that their country should or will take. In fact, as a white South African, critical of white oppression and white liberalism, she has suggested, often vigorously, ways for whites to fit in South Africa. This position has often made it impossible for Gordimer to negotiate her way out of prescription and didacticism. In the novel, she lives up to her belief that, “the white writer’s task as cultural worker is to raise the consciousness of white people,” (*The Essential* 293) hence the prescriptive tone of some utopian elements in the novel.

The Smales’ three children, Victor, Gina, and Royce, tolerate the trouble of a post apartheid South Africa. The gist of the utopian impulse that they represent lies in enacting for whites the terms of a future, more egalitarian coexistence with blacks. The relationship Gina establishes with Africans challenges the fears of racist whites of “going native,” and runs

through Gordimer's fervent appeal for 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" (*The Essential* 32). Gina metamorphoses into a black African girl, submerging herself in African language, manners, food, and perceptions, so much so that her new world has become the standard through which she perceives the rest of the world, "For Gina, who hadn't before seen in this village was new to the world" (*JP* 140). Instead of the Afrikaner lullabies she learned from her father, she now sings lullabies, "she had learnt from her [African] companions, in their language" (*JP* 79).

Gina's break with the old order is no more obvious in her relationship with African children. The lack of racial awareness in her attitude towards them contrasts favorably with the inequality that characterized the friendship of the young Maureen and her black servant Lydia. Although Maureen regarded Lydia as her best friend and confidante, their relations could not completely evade the hierarchy of white and black. So naturalized and deeply rooted was her sense of the entitlements of her race that Maureen questioned the propriety, the reason, and the complexion of Lydia carrying her school case on her head from school to her home. Margaret Lenta observes that, "her milieu, [Maureen] has assumed, ought as far as possible to be exclusively white, and blacks have had only a silent, servile role in it" (135). In contrast, Gina adopts the communal traditions of Africans in which the older children help raise the younger children, "She walked in with the old woman's sciatic gait of black children who carry brothers and sisters almost as big as they are. She had a baby on her small back and wore an expression of importance" (*JP* 41). Lenta states that, "the strength of Gina's friendship with Nyiko, a black girl also bodes well for the future of the races in South Africa" (156-7).

Gina's utopian relationship to Africa and Africans recalls Pratt's definition of the contact zone as, "an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co presence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect" (7). In this "social space," transculturation takes place. Transculturation describes, "how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (Pratt 6). While Pratt conceives of transculturation as largely consequent on asymmetrical power relations involving "colonizers and colonized," and as the attempt of the subordinated groups to construct liberal identities by rewriting the history of Western conquest and domination in order to contest it and inflect it with their own revisionist versions, the position Gina assumes in the African bush is that of the descendent of the white oppressors, of the colonizers, who has finally broken with her inheritance and adopted African values. For Gordimer, it is white South Africans who must redefine themselves by accepting the values of the majority group in South Africa. Since they have chosen to make Africa their home, they must equally assimilate its culture, language, and values. Gina thus hybridizes her identity by mixing her own cultural background with that of the Africans.

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. She is fully aware that the induction of the white South Africa into an egalitarian economic system is not going to be unproblematic or straightforward. However, although redistribution of wealth may be the most difficult goal to accomplish, it must be envisioned. Having undercut the liberal claims of the Smales for their failures with the vision of a young generation of South Africans who would create, although by fits and starts, an equitable economic system.

Victor displays a good deal of the unduly aggressive sense of ownership that Gordimer finds objectionable in white South Africa. When he arrives in the village, he wants to impress other children with his racing-car or truck but urges his mother to, “tell them they must not touch it. I don’t want my things messed up and broken. You must tell them” (*JP* 14). He also reacts with vehemence to the villagers using water from the tank which his father has installed, “Everybody’s taking water! They’ve found it comes out the tap! Everybody is taking it! I told them they’re going to get hell. But they don’t understand. Come quick, dad.” Undaunted by his parents’ dismissal of his complaint, he insists, “It’s ours, it’s ours” (*JP* 62-3). His sense of the inalienable rights of private property, however, seems merely a persistent remnant of a dying system. Offsetting his possessiveness is a growing understanding that property can be bartered – as when he exchanges the broken model cars from his racing track for, “skeletal carts, home-made of twisted wire by the black children” (*JP* 39) and that acquisition can be the result of a communal effort – as when he joins the harvest for a share of peanuts. Despite his shortcomings, Victor, like Gina, represents a model for white South Africans to emulate.

Two contrary utopian impulses can, then, be located in the novel. One is uncertain, undefined, and enigmatic; the other is unequivocal and unabashedly prescriptive. The disparity between them is the result of a tension that owes a great deal to the racial divide that has characterized South Africa and Gordimer’s response to it. On the one hand, Gordimer feels that, as a minority and, despite her dissidence, a member of the oppressive race, she has no right 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. The utopian impulse involving the Smales children owes its prescriptive tone to this attitude.

Gordimer maintains that the dissident South African novelist cannot afford to dissociate herself from her historical juncture and from the demands her society makes on her, “The creative act is not pure. History evidences it. Ideology demands it. Society exacts it. The writer loses Eden, writes to be read, and comes to realize that he is answerable” (*The Essential* 285-86). Moreover, defining herself as, “a white; a dissident; a white writer” (*The Essential* 272), Gordimer has conceived of her role as lying in exposing the complicity of white South Africans with apartheid and in imagining ways for them to redeem themselves.

Despite her zealous exposition of the effects of apartheid on blacks, Gordimer has mostly explored the complicity, conscious and unconscious, of whites with apartheid, their failure to oppose it, and the possibilities of an unbiased interracial coexistence that lie ahead. Although she has created well-developed and compelling black characters, she has, for a number of reasons, having to do with audience, authority, and access to relevant information, focused mostly on whites. As she admits that, “I doubt whether the white writer, even if giving expression to the same themes as blacks, has much social use in inspiring blacks, or is needed to. Sharing the life of the ghettos is the primary qualification the white writer lacks” (*The Essential* 294). Gordimer states that, the white writer has no choice but to address his work to other whites, “To be a white writer is firstly to be presented with a political responsibility if not an actual orthodoxy: the white writer’s task as ‘cultural worker’ is to raise the consciousness of white people, who, unlike himself have not woken up” (*The Essential* 293). In her own writing, she has taken it upon herself to educate whites, informing them of the human and moral cost of apartheid and defining their place in a post apartheid society.

Gordimer states that, unless he (the white writer) wants to align himself with the forces of oppression and court irrelevance, “the white writer has to make the decision whether to remain responsible to the dying white order... or to declare himself positively as answerable to the order struggling to be born” (278). He may not succeed in changing the policies of his government but, “he brings some influence to bear on whites” (*The Essential* 294). His committed work is, “a revolutionary gesture” that enables him, “to offer the creation of a new society” (*The Essential* 295).

To conclude *July’s People* stands as a testimony to Gordimer’s staunch commitment to a post apartheid South Africa. The interregnum it examines is Janus-faced: it locates the origin of contemporary impasses in a past of discrimination and complicities, and sets its eyes on a potentially hopeful future that may shatter the intolerable impasse of apartheid. Gordimer resists with representing the course in which post apartheid South Africa may find salvation; she refrains from speculating on the essentials of that future because it belongs to blacks more than whites to decide its content. But she does not shy away from discussing, often prescriptively, the kind of role whites should fulfill in a prospective democratic society, constantly urging them to bring to an end the claim of privileges based exclusively on race and to remedy economic inequality by sharing property with black South Africans.

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