
JULY'S PEOPLE: AN ANTI-APARTHEID COMMITMENT OF NADINE GORDIMER

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Abstract: Nadine Gordimer is a writer who takes her task as a writer with utmost sincerity and commitment. Starting in 1949 with her first novel, her writings follow the trajectory of the apartheid movement in South Africa but with a difference. In her novel 'July's People' besides sympathizing with the cause of the blacks and the coloureds, Gordimer portrays the derailment and the devastation of the 'Whites' that comes in the wake of the revolution. Here the white family has to leave the safety of their luxurious house and find shelter in the black spaces of their servant July's native village. The novel, *July's People*, very aptly portrays how because of the black revolution the power equations between the whites and the blacks have changed; and that the apartheid system is defunct; and how the master-servant relationship changes. In Johannesburg, July, the servant, was all subservient to Maureen and Bam, the Smales couple. But as they reach July's village, the relationship undergoes a sea change; as July gets more power and advantage over the whites. The change in circumstances reversely gives more power to July when Smales family is physically and culturally dislocated. Though the story unfolds at a languid pace, it keeps you on edge; once more reminding the reader that Gordimer is not just a political voice but an absolutely consummate artist!

Keywords: Apartheid, Devastation of the Black, Derailment of the Whites, Reversal of Power Relations.

Introduction: "The 'committed' writer knows that words are action. He knows that **to reveal is to change** ... the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that no body may say that he is innocent of what it is all about." (Jean Paul Satre, *What is Literature?* 14, emphasis added)

Nadine Gordimer has taken the responsibility of "revealing" to the world how the unjust system of apartheid had been making its evil presence felt in every corner of South Africa. In doing so, she is not just fulfilling her commitment towards the just regime in South Africa, but at the same time is working towards the day when Apartheid finally gets over in the nation. Apartheid began to be institutionalized in 1948 when the National Party Government came to power and race-related legislations started its journey. In the same period, in 1949, Nadine Gordimer's first work of art *Face to Face* was published. Since then Nadine Gordimer has published eleven novels and eleven collections of short stories which dealt with the way the history of the anti-apartheid movement found its trajectory in South Africa. In that sense she is a 'committed' writer (to take the phrase from Sartre) who decided to take up the cause of the blacks and the coloured in her writings and presented them in such a way that it helps in the cause of the revolution.

In *July's People*, Nadine Gordimer presents how the white people's lives are derailed and devastated because of the black revolution against apartheid regime. The whites have been making the lives of the blacks torturous for years by their racial segregation, and when the black revolution begins the white, like the Smales family, have to leave their luxurious life in the cities and take recourse to the black spaces for safety. The comforts of the city houses are being taken away from the Smales family as they have to leave their house in Johannesburg and take flight to their servant July's native place in black locality. The novel portrays the hardships that the Smales family faces as they are bereft of their seven bed-roomed mansion to a small hut in a black locality.

The capitalist luxurious life of the city of Johannesburg had to be left for 'safety.' In Johannesburg, July, the servant, was all subservient to Maureen and Bam, the Smales couple. But as they reach July's village,

the relationship undergoes a sea change; as July gets more power and advantage over the whites. The change in circumstances reversely gives more power to July when Smales family is physically and culturally dislocated.

The title of the novel is significant as to who are 'July's people' – are they blacks in July's native place or are they the Smales family in the black locality. As the economic context of material position shifts base, so does power-relations between the whites and the blacks. In this context, the roles of blacks and whites are reversed / start reversing leading to a new political and cultural situation which is emerging. The epigraph of the novel from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* – "the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, there arises a great diversity of sickly symptoms" significantly alludes to this new situation. The epigraph is an apt description of the new political situation where the blacks get more and more power over the whites and the whites, especially the Smales family in the novel *July's People*, are left in the lurch to suffer the situation in ignominy.

One of the results of the black revolution is that the bourgeois white are taken away from their civil power to protect their wealth and privileges. The whites become the target of attack of the black revolutionaries because of ages of racial injustices that they have suffered. Therefore, as the whites fly away to places of safety (in the novel, July's hinterland) they need to redefine their newly acquired position and status. Lock is of the opinion that Maureen realizes that her "previous interactions with the world she inhabits, necessitates a reevaluation that encompasses race, class and gender." (Lock, 6.)

The Smales family along with July drives through the bushes for three days to become a burden to their host – July's family. The novelist, Nadine Gordimer, describes the state of the village in details, as she mentions – "...stamped mud and dung floor, above her, cobwebs stringy with dirt dangling from the rough wattle steeple that supported the frayed grey thatch. Stalks of light poked through. A rim of shady light where the mud walls did not meet the eaves; nests glued there, of a brighter-colored mud - wasps or bats." (*July's People*, 2) In such a setting, the Smales family is displaced culturally from their luxurious urban home. The small hut infested with chickens and large insects deeply stresses on Maureen's mind as she is displaced by the living arrangement in July's village. Maureen vents his anger against Bam –

"And here what was he here, an architect lying on a bed in a mud hut,
a man without a vehicle." (*July's People*, 98)

Bam's old identity (when he is in Johannesburg) of being the head of the family is being questioned here by Maureen. It presents the deeply patriarchal mindset of the Smales family as Bam in Johannesburg is the source of income and the provider of the comforts to the family and Maureen expects that he should carry on with the same role when they have shifted to the black locality. Bam himself is trying to adjust to his new role in this typical circumstance as the urban leisure is gone and here in July's village it is an existence about survival. Devoid of urban facilities, without clean water, electricity and proper sanitation, the Smales family find themselves in claustrophobic situation where it becomes difficult for them to breathe properly. There is no baths and toilets for cleaning their sweats and bad smells. There is absence of private washing place. Maureen is even afraid to cook in the pot used by the black people.

Nadine Gordimer is able to very significantly show the fear and anguishes of the white civilization as they are bereft of their privileges. Without the privileges the whites find themselves lost and they are not able to cope up with themselves. The luxurious extravaganza of a seven roomed house with a swimming pool is juxtaposed a small hut where "everything in these villages could be removed at the sweep of a bulldozer and turned to ashes by a single match in the thatch." (*July's People*, 113 – 114) Thus there is extreme uneasiness about the way they live in the village.

The morning they decide to visit the Chief they are dressed in much dirtier attire than that of July or Daniel. Even when they visit the Chief, Bam expects the Chief's house to be made of bricks which does not come true. When Bam finds out that the Chief stays without any basic facilities they are surprised. In this state of dislocation, Bam and Maureen, the Smales couple, are bewildered at the way the blacks live their lives. This is their first encounter with Black's way of life and they are flabbergasted. Thus, as

the Smales family live like this in the dilapidated hut of July, they get nostalgic about their return to home; but there is no way out. The bitter experiences of Smales family can be the best example of physical and cultural dislocation which Homi Bhaba terms as “unhomeliness” – the unhomeliness which results from being the comforts of the home taken away from them.

The Smales family has always been proud of themselves for giving equal treatment to July – providing him with a room and paying him properly; giving him Wednesdays and interchanging Sundays as day offs; allowing to have his friends home and also to allow his mistress Ellen to come in. Even though all these were the facilities July was enjoying back in Johannesburg; he was always subservient to his masters. But the power equation starts changing in July’s village as July tries to assert his authority. The control of exercising power starts when July takes possession of the bakkie key and drives it to Indian store to get provisions.

The Smales family could not deal with July’s newly gained power –

“Their reaction to his assertive use of the car betrays the limitations of their liberalism. 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 equality, they resent him” (Erritouni, 117)

In this circumstance, it can be said that July not only ignores the authority of Bam but also laughs at the supposed white authority. To test things, in one occasion, Maureen calls July “Go and say I want to see him.” (*July’s People*, 68); but here too July appears very calm and composed without any sign of former obedience / subservience. July’s earlier subordination has now turned to assertion of power –

“His refusal to ask for permission to use the car indicates his rejection of the Smales’ previous status as white bosses and a reminder to them that the old order is defunct”(Eritouni, 118 -119)

Whereas earlier in Johannesburg, July was completely subservient to the Smales family; in the village he knows that he has got the position of power and therefore his behavior changes. He knows that he can assert himself as he has now got into the position of power.

In the city of Johannesburg, Bam has been the figure of authority, but back in July’s village he has no power. When his shot gun is there he still feels that he has certain power, but as his gun is stolen he loses that power to some extent. Bam thinks that the shot gun is a substitution for police protection. So when his gun is lost, he frantically tries to search it in every corner of the little hut.

As Bam’s family’s position starts degrading, the supposed apparent honesty and loyalty of July finds itself faltering. As soon as they leave Johannesburg, July is the chief architect of their lives as he is the one who takes all the major decisions for all, including the Smales family. Even to the extent of who all will go to visit the Chief and at what time is decided by July.

The novel, *July’s People*, very aptly portrays how because of the black revolution, when the power equations between the whites and the blacks have changed and the apartheid system is defunct, how the master-servant relationship changes. How the servant becomes more powerful than the master as the physical and cultural space of the master (whites) is dislocated. The Smales family’s degradable and despicable condition to a large extent portrays the state of the whites when the apartheid system is over.

Thus amongst the volatile relationship of master and servant, the novel progresses to a situation when at the end of the novel, Maureen desperately rushes to the helicopter to put an end to her life in July’s village. She has always been dreaming to return to her urban home and when she finds the helicopter she thinks that it is her only chance to be out of the claustrophobic, unhygienic and deplorable condition that she is in. Her mad rush to the helicopter suggests the tragic situation that she is trapped in and from where she is looking for a way out.

The Smales cannot digest the fact that they have become July's people as Maureen says –

“She looked at her servant: they were their creatures, like their cattle and pigs.”
(*July's People*, 96).

Smales are part of the old power during the days of the apartheid and July is the new power post-apartheid. Though July does not use the Smales family as his servants; but he has a complete control over their lives. According to Head –

“When Maureen runs to the sound of the helicopter at the end of the novel, just such an acceptance is implied: it is not clear whether the helicopter heralds the arrival of revolutionary forces, or of government forces re-establishing the old order. This is an apocalyptic moment for the bankrupt white identity: the white woman finally accepts that she has no inner resource and no residual power or control to deal with her situation. She runs to accept the inevitability that her fate lies in the hands of others.” (Head, 134).

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