



Apartheid and Postapartheid in Nadine Gordimer's Novel (July's People)

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the views that Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) contains both a dystopian critique of apartheid South Africa and utopian thought that predicts a more egalitarian postapartheid system. Gordimer criticizes chiefly white South African liberals who didn't recognize their own discriminatory policies of apartheid. Although they rejected the colour discrimination yet resisted redistribution of South Africa's material resources. One of the central aims of the paper is to present that Gordimer's use of utopia in *July's People* concur the postmodern rejection of grand narratives. Gordimer does not imagine a full-fledged postapartheid South Africa; rather, she merely expects the possibilities for an equal existence between blacks and whites. If apartheid, with its policies of racial segregation favours the whites economically, Gordimer envisions a postapartheid future where whites would cure the financial differences between them and their fellow black South Africans.

Key words: Dystopian, Apartheid, Postapartheid, Utopian, Egalitarian

About Thirteen years before the official demise of apartheid in South Africa Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* was published in 1981 that predicts the inevitable destruction of 'white South Africa' and the need of new political and social realities that would require white South Africans to fashion the form of a new identity. Gordimer didn't focus that who would rule South Africa. She

assumed that blacks would be the victorious in their struggle for political and economic justice, and whites would find themselves in a subordinate position, ruled by blacks. Eventually Gordimer had the utopian vision of a democratic South Africa, led by the black majority. *July's People*, however, dwells less on the pending demise of white South Africa and on the utopia of an

alternative future, and more on the difficulties that arise from the attempt to surpass the old order in anticipation of a new one.

Gordimer sets the plot of *July's People* in a dystopian future in order to warn the expected catastrophic consequences if the economic exploitation and the political hegemony of Africans continued. To adapt Kumar's assessment of nineteenth-century dystopias, the white South Africa Gordimer writes about in *July's People* was "already so far anti-utopian [or dystopian] as to require little in the way of futuristic elaboration"(110). In fact, as Gordimer points out in an interview conducted in 1987:

In the few years since [July's People] was written [. . .] many of the things which seemed like science fiction then, have begun to happen, and it's not because I'm a seer or prophet, but because it was there. We'd been doing things that would bring this about (qtd. in Bazin 119).

July's People opens with white South African Maureen and Bamford Smales in a shack provided to them by their former

black servant July. They have escaped war-torn Johannesburg to the African bush where July is offering them shelter among his family and people. Their new life is a far cry from and is starkly contrasted to the sumptuous life they have led before the war undermined the props that supported their privilege. Bam and Maureen owned "a seven-roomed house and swimming-pool" (Gordimer *July* 25), could afford to hire live-in servants, went on frequent hunting trips, had "growing savings and investments" (Gordimer *July* 8), threw extravagant parties: in short, they led a comfortable middle-class life. As the civil war, pitting black revolutionaries against the racist white government of South Africa, creates what Tom Moylan calls in his definition of dystopia a map of social hell (Gordimer *July* 112) Smaleses find themselves in the same situation of deprivation Africans have suffered for years, that is, without the most rudimentary comforts of modern living. The rigors of their new life force them, especially Maureen, to reckon with the origins of their social and economic privilege and with some of their unquestioned assumptions about racial equality in South Africa. It is true that Bam and Maureen have sought to

dissociate themselves from the extremes of apartheid: they treated their black servants decently, found the racist policies of white South Africa unacceptable, and even tried, though unsuccessfully, 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” (Gordimer *July* 8). Even so, it is known from the history of apartheid that their wealth and easy life owed a great deal to the policies of the South African nation-state under white rule. Apartheid, Leonard Thompson points out, “sought both to afrikanerize state institutions, such as the civil service, the police and the army, and to promote a large and wealthy Afrikaner business community” (12-13)

In many of her novels, essays, and interviews, Gordimer exposes the imbrications of white South Africans, including the liberals, with the racist policies of their nation-state. She is especially critical of South African liberals because she considers their opposition to apartheid to be ineffective. As liberals, Maureen and Bam want to belong to a multiracial society, but, they hold on jealously to their material possessions and privileges. They 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 (ANC), 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.

Gordimer makes it clear that sharing property is the litmus test for the white South African liberals. It is not sufficient, for her, to sympathize with blacks, eject 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). She has no

faith in the injunction “Love one another or perish” as a solution to the disparities between whites and blacks, because she doubts that “you [can] love me while I have a full stomach and you are hungry” (145). 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” (Gordimer “How Should We Look” 145).

In *July's People*, Gordimer does not simply expose the impasse to which apartheid condemned interracial relations. She equally envisions a utopian future in which South Africans try to overcome their intractable social and economic problems. It must be immediately noted, however, that the postapartheid era Gordimer foresees 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 prescription 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 naïve 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 can be assessed that *July's People* was written during the turbulent period sandwiched between the old colonial, apartheid regime, and the new democratic regime under the Nationalist government, and shows how the dual concerns of ethics and aesthetics have been reconciled in them through deft scripting of the sagas of the protagonists of the novel, striking a balance between the delineation of the private and the public.

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