

The Utopian Downfall of the White Africans in Gordimer's 'July's People'

Ghulam Yasin

Lecturer in English Govt. Degree College Kabirwala, Pakistan

Shaukat Ali

Lecturer in English Govt. Post Graduate College Vehari, Pakistan

Abstract: 'July's People' by Nadine Gordimer presents the utopian vision in which the system of apartheid has been overturned. First the fiction addresses social dogmas set by the white Africans which become the cause of disgrace for the black Africans. But with the beginning of 2nd half of the twentieth century, how they raise the question of their equality in the society and how they simultaneously reject the elements of discrimination on the basis of their color and race, it would be interrogated. The paper would further describe the presentation of a utopia in the form of reverse of power and how this downfall brings the forced existence of the Smales' (white) family among the dominated black community of July, their ex-servant. It would find what difficulties the white families may face if this utopia is turned into reality. This study is a descriptive and textual analysis of the text 'July's people' would help to find out the details and concluding arguments in this regard.

Key words: Apartheid, dominant, subjugation, power

Introduction

South Africa, colonized by both the British and the Dutch, is consisting of the population of a black majority and a large number of the people of India, Asia, and mixed race (or Colored people) are residing in it. In 1948, after the centuries of racist policies, South Africa's National Party government introduced and enacted the apartheid laws in order to differentiate and segregate the people on the basis of their colors and races. The only purpose seems behind this act is to create a racial hierarchy that will describe the superiority of whites above other races. This policy of apartheid by the government divides the whole nation, and establishes the senses of inferiority complex and ill will among the people of different races. However these cruel or draconian laws bring up the new thought among the morally conscious South Africans. They oppose it openly; claim the elimination of such racism and demand for the establishment of a more human friendly and non-racial society.

In the whole period of slavery or interregnum, certainly the few white authors have played their important roles by using their pen powers, perception and conception in order to highlight the sympathetic conditions of the South African society. Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) has not only presented the fiction which portrays the non-racial attitudes and society but also inspires the contemporary white authors to present the fiction in support of the oppressed so that the country may come out of this interregnum and enter into a new non-racial state. She claims in her writings that the white authors should make efforts in awakening the consciousness of the

white people and bring them into the main stream. Panirao (2014) comments regarding the writings of Nadine Gordimer, "*Gordimer's writing dealt with moral and racial issues, particularly apartheid in racial South Africa, she is courageous starchy attitudes would promptly and peremptorily discuss. Also, she is fulfilling her cultural task of showing that resistance to white domination comes not only from blacks but from whites as well. Both are finding ways of working beyond separatism to renewed vision of a culture unfragmented by apartheid*" (p, 174-175)

'July's People' was presented by Nadine Gordimer in 1981, many years before the end of Apartheid regime in South Africa (1994). The major event of this novel is narration of the story of revolution of black people that starts against the white ruling system. Apparently, it shows the relationship of a white liberal family (the Smales) and their black servant (July). This relationship of a master and a slave goes to the radical change with the rise of revolution in South Africa. This utopia totally transforms the characters into a new state and status with the change of their role in the society and gives them new identities.

July's People presents the true mood of the South African black people who are expecting the better coming days and are ready to get involved in the revolutionary violence, as it was already started in many countries after 1950s. The important thing regarding the novel 'July's People' is, it does not describe the revolution or the fight for freedom but it puts forward a prophecy or assumption that a new event is going to happen very near in future. It just gives the imagination that what sort of sufferings or effects will be endured by the white liberal families in this scenario. How sympathetic this situation would be, once they were the masters, then they had to take refuge in the house of the servant or beg for their safety by a black servant. They have a hope to rise again after the end of the war but this hope comes to an end with the passage of time. Finally, all the tools of white civilization begin to rot or hide in the blackness of the July's village. The white family's relationships with the powerful authorities prove to be useless and hollow. But the only hope is their children now; their absorption in the village life gives a strong message for a race free and new construction of South Africa. Prof. Abdulatif (2014) states, "*July's People (1981) is one of Gordimer's best accomplishments. Written in a period of massive political transition, [...] Gordimer consolidated her utter commitment to ending Apartheid. Crucially, July's People exposes in its characters how the white South Africans felt more superior (whether financially or intellectually) than the non-white South Africans who had to endure the obstacles and misery that faced them. Through the mouthpiece of some of the characters, Nadine Gordimer manifested how the South African people craved for an end to their darkest moments (the Apartheid regime). In her novel, the author envisioned a revolution to overthrow the Apartheid. It was as if she had prepared the ground for a later event that would become a true revolution*". (p. 69)

The novel may also be taken as a prediction of what might happen if the black people got success in achieving their goals and powers. Though the disaster scenes as the result of violent and bloody revolution or the anarchy as portrayed in July's People had not yet been welcomed in the territories of South Africa when the novel was being published but this utopia was telling the news of black empowerment and the gradual decline of the white authority. Tim Conrad (2015) mentions it, "*The book is set against imagined violence and revolution and, in this way, achieves a wise conceit of reversal: whites forced to shelter with blacks, the served become dependent*

upon the servant. The new world is somewhat upside down, but the lingering ways in which it is still very much right side up are perhaps the most interesting. July, for example, continues to call Bam "master" even though they were never fond of this term back in Johannesburg, and July remains "July" even though he is in his own village. [...] Gradually, however, he drifts into independence" (web)

The major concern of the text of the novel is to deal with the complexities and conflicts as created during the period of transition from the downfall of apartheid and the developing stage of the active and effective black government. It presents the crucial phases and scenes of the racial segregation.

In 'July's People' one of the major concern of Gordimer is also with the white lady who comes forth from the white enclave and gets herself involved in a sick relationship with the black servant. She struggles like the blacks for her own identity. The important thing is the settings of this novel, lady is the white in color but remaining everything like culture, colonies and people are the black. She wants an escape from this imposed identity but she is helpless. Her this embarrassment with the black makes her revolutionary in a true sense. Darren Felty states about the character of Maureen, "*In her attempts to overcome the constraints of her current existence [in the village], Maureen actually discovers the limits of her former existence and the arrogance of her comfortable sense of personal worth" (As cited in Abdulatif 2014, 72)*

Review of Literature

Iman Abdulsattar Abdulatif (2014) states, the utopian fiction "*July's people*" is one of the best and the most powerful writing by Gordimer. Basically, it was written in a particular period when massive political changes were in the process and Gordimer showed her utter commitment and concerns for ending the Apartheid. Inwardly, *July's People* exposes clearly in its characters how the white South Africans consider themselves superior (whether financially or intellectually) than the other non-white South Africans. A couple of characters become the mouthpiece of Gordimer and she presents how the South African people work and struggle for the purpose of terminating their dark era (the Apartheid regime). In this novel, the author revolutionizes the people to come out of their homes and overthrow the Apartheid or white men dominancy. It seems as if she is preparing ground for the later events that would become a real and strong revolution.

Ibrahim Radwan (2015) mentions that Gordimer's utopia of *July's People* reflects her own ambivalence regarding two possible results of the South African revolution. It unfolds the untold and hidden stories about the rise of the oppressed South African community having desire for autonomy and liberal state after being releases from the manacles of white Afrikaners, and reinforces the presence of the whites rather than their demise. The settings of *July's People* give space to the characters existing in an interregnal space in which one discourse is coming near to an end and the other is in the process of emerging. Gordimer seems standing and trying to create new space between the utopian and dystopian post-apartheid realms.

(Abdullah K. Shehabat, 2012) claims that Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* is a superb example for a post-apartheid interregnum which also presents a contrasted view regarding the

mood of white liberal failure. Further, Gordimer also displays two conflicting scenes in which the roles are reversed: the black servant (July) becomes a master and the masters (Smales) become the dependent. When the chaos spreads around in South Africa, the white liberals become unsafe or insecure, so the Smales representing the white colonizer society move to Johannesburg, July's town, in the want of refuge and safe place. Now, the life of Smales turns upside-down. Once they were independent, free and masters, but then their powers were shifted and became fully dependant on their servant. In this way, their servant becomes their new master. They try to keep their grip on their personal properties so that they may remain in touch with their past. In fact, they are not convinced mentally that the past has become over and the situation is changing rapidly.

Methodology

The research will rely and observe the different aspects of the African society and its codes of living as presented by Gordimer. The original text of the novel July's People will be the primary source of collecting data for the research. The mode of the research is qualitative and descriptive in nature. Along with analysis of the selected text, the reviews and views of the different scholars, interviews and biographies of the author will also be focused in order to attain the clarity regarding the issues. Further, the researcher will analyze the text by keeping in view the critical race theory and post colonial view as well.

The utopian downfall of the white family

The study of July's People actually unfolds the story of the revolution which has never been told and is based on the futuristic dream. Her own personal experiences and true feelings are also involved in this utopia. This story is in a narrative form which narrates the imaginary revolution on the land of South Africa. The past history of the revolution is based upon two different races. One is black race, the subordinates, and the other is the ruling race, the white. It is quite interesting that the novel is the depiction of these two races but their roles have been reversed. It is the period of transition where the element of fear and loss is evident. The whole novel shows the atmosphere of disappointment and uncertainty where life has lost its structure. Gordimer (1988) presents this uncertainty regarding the white people, "*the black knows he will be at home, at last while 'the white' does not know whether he will find his home at last*" (p. 270).

Gordimer brings two different families, one white family and the other is black, only to expose the gender and racial discrimination or inequalities being found in South Africa during the reign of Apartheid. She has presented the comparison and contrast of these families in many different ways in the whole novel. Two families with the different background and culture come not only close to one another and their roles are also interchanged with the passage of time. The masters or rulers become slave or dependant. For this purpose, she brings both families the Smales and the July's together on the same location. The reverse of the roles in fact presents the clear picture of the inequalities; black families were facing during the era of slavery or Apartheid rule. Mayo (1999) believes in this regard, "[T]here exist moments wherein the whole process undergoes a crisis. This indicates that there can be room for counter-hegemonic activity, which can be very effective at highly determinate moments. There are also excluded areas of social life

that can constitute a terrain of contestation for people involved in such counter-hegemonic activities” (P. 38).

Though it seems sometimes that the few presentations of the inequality are superficial but it provides the readers insight about the economic and social differences being developed on the basis of race and color. The very beginning of the novel shows the differences in the living conditions of the families. The people of white are enjoying all the facilities of the cities and comforts while the black families are belonging to the ghettos, deprived of the basic necessities of the life as well. The house of Smales representing the white colonies is in the neat and clean area with, “[...] *separate kitchen, drawing room and wash room and even contains a garden for the aesthetic pleasure. The black servants are there for serving them and making the life full of comforts*” (P. 19) On the other hand, the village of their servant July lacks all the facilities and presents a dark picture. They have no concept of huge buildings or the wide open houses. There is no partition of rooms like bed room, kitchen or wash room. They all are compelled to live in a single room home or hut and even sleep together. They are also the citizens of the same country and subjects of the same rulers. Only on the basis of race, one is being rewarded up to the maximum while the other is being deprived of everything relating to the life.

As the utopian revolution begins and the white family has no other option except of taking refuge in the village of July, the white family is compelled to live in the ghettos along with the black and the description of July’s home is pitiable. Maureen observes it as, “*A stiff rolled-up cowhide, a hoe on a nail, a small pile of rags and a part of a broken Primus stove, left against the wall. The hen and chickens were moving there; but the slight sound she heard did not come from them. There would be mice and rats. Flies wandered the air and found the eyes and mouths of her children, probably still smelling of vomit, dirty, sleeping, safe*” (P. 4)

It is necessary to illustrate the justification of the freedom movement or the revolutionary steps required for upgrading the life style. The black people work all the day, serve the white families from dawn to dusk but lack all the facilities required for the human beings. Gordimer wants to make the white realize by bringing them in the natural but tough conditions, how it is difficult to spend days and nights. She further explores the difficulties of the white family in the town of July by describing the dirt of the land, “[...] *didn’t show nearly so badly on black children [...] yet it imprints “the joints and knuckle-lines of her little claws and toes and ash furred the invisible white fluff on her blond legs*” (p. 42).

It becomes almost impossible for the white family to keep their existence in such surroundings. Their facilities have been taken away and are now living like the common Africans. There is a danger and sense of losing life on every step then Maureen observes the difficulty: “[...] *The flying cockroaches that hit her face were creatures she was unfamiliar with. There were others like outsize locusts*” (p. 48)

Two women, July’s wife and Maureen, belonging to the different races look themselves as they are different in physic and structure as well. When Maureen comes to the mud hut, her first comment shows disgust for her own sex regarding her dark skin and calls her thighs as, “[...] *huge hams on which the women rested on the earth floor as among cushions*” (p. 15). Maureen further describes that the soles feet of the village women are baked with ash and criticizes their dressings as well. On the other side, the wife of July also looks Maureen as a

different creation. She comments that she has found nothing in Maureen as the white lady should possess. She calls Maureen dirty, ugly and the woman who does not like wearing the dress. So, it is the effect of race that women belonging to the same sex show disgrace for one another.

The role of female gender in the family is also ignored when they visit the village of July. Maureen seems to be imprisoned in the mud house and only her husband takes the charge. As being a male member, he is the sole monarch and takes all the decisions and considers them good for all. When Bam arranges a meeting with the chief of the village, he is the only spoke man and representative of the family. They are in the need of permission for their stay. Though Maureen contains equal space in the family but she is not considered as partner in making decision. Bam considers it his innate duty to lead or make good for his family. *"The peak of his provider role and the accomplishment that gave him the most pride was when he was able to shoot two warthogs for the village"*. (P. 77)

With the reverse of roles, lives of the Smales family are under the control of July for the first time. It is also happening for the first time that any black person is controlling the life of Bam. It shows what sort of emotional damage may occur in the personality of beings in these circumstances. Bam realizes his helplessness when he loses his Bakki in the hands of July, who uses it independently and without their permission. Bakki is not a truck but it is the symbol of economics. Having keys of Bakki in the hands of July is actually the financial control of the family. Bam (as blacks were in the past) is now jobless and cannot enjoy the pleasures of his life like the drink etc. His gun has been stolen and the radio is broken. He is now leading dull and useless life as the black men were doing in the past. *"What was he here, an architect lying on a bed in a mud hut, a man without a vehicle"* (p. 98).

July was once the servant but he comes forward as a protector and provider after the downfall of the white family. He looks after the Smales and treats their children as his own; he is no more rash or subservient and talks to Maureen in a very polite manner. Maureen begins to feel annoyed with July as July becomes the man who controls her. It seems with the change of conditions, the role of Bam becomes passive and is even changed with the role of July. Maureen though confronts July on different issues where as Bam remains in the mud hut. This change of leading roles happens naturally because there is no overwhelming racial code to observe or follow. (Madden, 2007) describes it in these words: *"Almost all the props that supported Bam's authority are now gone, including both the pride and power he derived from his status as a professional in the city, and the machine upon which he relied for his mobility; he is thus left vulnerable and exposed, and the strength of his patriarchal claim upon the leadership of the family starts to crumble"* (p. 22)

In the same row, Maureen opposes her complete reliance on July and his family. She is the only white character who is struggling to come out this traumatic shift. She always desires but she is as helpless as blacks were in the past. She makes it clear that she doesn't need the other ladies to find food or living necessities for her family and she would do it without anyone else's help. Her determination is shown when she moves up her pants and works with black ladies in the field. As Gordimer mentions it, *"they worked along a donga like a team, unspokenly together, now side by side, now passing and re-passing each other, closely"*(P. 92).

In fact, Maureen tries hard to change the circumstances of the life, despite the fact that she is doing that reluctantly. She is fighting for her lost status but, the worst it is, the status is here defined with the dominant race not with the color. Among the villagers, Maureen feels distanced; July's wife snickers at her since she realizes that they belong to the different. Regardless of her separation from the black women, Maureen goes ahead with her work to collect some green leaves to cook for her family. Whereas the black people try to adopt the white laws and traditions, Bam and Maureen endeavor to find a position in their new environment and battle to keep up their personalities. The black people are portrayed as tolerating as ordinary living in rottenness and the separation of politically-sanctioned racial segregation and opposing the change of self-principle. On another hand, the Smales' family encounters the traumatic changes in the attempt to agree with the new post-apartheid system in South Africa. Incited by changes in post-progressive South Africa, white-black relationships experience the unchangeable modifications including a reversal of the positions of abused and the abuser or the oppressed and the oppressor. Maureen mentions it as, "*she was aware among them in the hut, of not knowing where she was, in time, in the order of a day as she had always known it*" (P. 17) It is strange to mention that the whites endeavor hard to change and the blacks can't grasp the change that the interregnum created and reinforce the new conditions of opportunity and freedom.

Conclusion

Humanistic study of the novel shows disgrace in race without mentioning the color. It passes through different phases. First phase shows the past picture and it is the rule of Apartheid or white supremacy in Johannesburg. Second phase portrays the present time; it is based upon the utopia and the desire of the black race power in the town of July. Third phase is still vague and foggy because it is connected with the future. It does not conclude at any point but it raises the questions regarding the survival of the white race if the system is reversed or a new set up of the black government is established in South Africa.

Here almost, Gordimer is giving a prophetic vision to the blending of both the races in South Africa when Maureen gets ready tea for July. It is additionally symbolized when Maureen crosses the waterway to keep running towards the helicopter at the end of the novel (third phase) which may be considered a continuation to the past demonstration when Maureen washes her discharging clothes in the stream.

Nadine Gordimer as being a white African writer plays her important role in describing the dehumanization and destructive nature of race or racism in Africa. She even does not discriminate the characters on the basis of color by presenting the equal sufferings of the white as well as black Africans. She does not target the black communities but she also portrays the loathsome attitudes for the both (white and black) and for one another. She wants to make the white Africans (through Smales family) realized for what they have done and what they can face if there happens the reverse of power. She is not only pleading the case of black African families but she is having a collective view regarding the African continent.

This credit goes to Nadine Gordimer who has portrayed the revolutionary vision before the end of apartheid rule. Though it is a utopia and could never happen in Africa so far but she

has described the rules for the transfer or sharing of the power. She even alarms the white Africans about their status or the havoc might be done in case of reverse of the power.

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