Race, Gender and Female Subjectivity: Addressing the White Woman Question in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

SAJDA CHOWDHURY

ABSTRACT

Published in 198, almost a decade before the official end of the Apartheid system, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* attempts to foresee the consequences of the violence of Apartheid while addressing themes such as exploitation and alienation triggered by racism and the effect of political persecution on the lives of ordinary South Africans. At the heart of this emotionally fraught narrative is an exploration of the female subjective reality of the liberal white woman within the realm of socially constructed and authorized spatial segregation and a protest against the inescapable hermetic spaces occupied by black men and women. The pervasive presence of a false consciousness that dominates and negotiates such spatial segregation—particularly along gender lines is brilliantly communicated in a controlled and restrained style in *July's People*.

The Smales—a family of white liberals flee from a conflict-ridden Johannesburg and seek refuge with their African servant July. The narrative subtly deconstructs the shifts in conflicting power dynamics, as the Smales struggle to accept their new-found subservience to July. The appropriation and misappropriation of power play is engulfed and internalised as part of the collective consciousness of people living in a racially divided country where the 'white' woman question is only a dismembered fragment of the whole. Failure to hold on to her traditionally assumed role,

Maureen Smales resists the dissemination of power inequalities as she constantly attempts to efface the blurred relationship lines between July and herself. The paper seeks to underline the harsh realities of female subjectivity drawing on racial and gender spaces and attempting to open up corridors for further interrogation on the bleak future of the white woman minority in apartheid South Africa.

In significant moments of political conflict or crisis, such as the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902), the establishment of the apartheid state in 1948, and the Soweto uprising of 1976, questions of language and literary production have been interrogated with 'race' in the nucleus of the debate. With the exacerbation of the racial conflict in the 1940s and the establishment of the apartheid state, writers in English gravitated towards a common enterprise: the employment of a literature as a modus operandi against apartheid and using diverse means of literary strategies spanning from Peter Abrahams in *Mine Boy* (1946) to Alan Paton in *Cry the Beloved Country*(1948). While the politics of race has been diversely addressed by both male and female writers, gender-specific concerns is somewhere dissipated or suppressed in many seminal feminist ideas by the then government. Such issues were considered minor and irrelevant compared to the macrocosmic apartheid. One such unfortunate incident was the banning of several historic texts. The overriding concern in the struggle for gender equality in the context of South African history has been invariably allied with the fight for racial liberation. Consequently, non-white feminists are inclined to view feminism as more of an extravagant European importation tailored to accommodate the concerns of the middle class white women, a maladjusted ideology in the African context.

Nadine Gordimer was born into a privileged white middle

class family with a strong political opposition to apartheid. Her works focus on the harrowing effects of apartheid on the lives of the ordinary South Africans- both black and white, delineating the damaging moral and psychological consequences of living in a racially divided country. Her detached and unsentimental style of writing purveys themes such as exile, compromise; exploitation and alienation that are surveyed against the growth of black consciousness and increasingly complicates the question of the white privilege. Notwithstanding her deep seated ideals and impassioned plea against apartheid, evidently, Gordimer was denied a voice and perspective simply because she, being a white, did not suffer as the blacks did. She has been criticized for writing without suffering as a black woman what she herself has described as "the languid evasions of liberal guilt".

However, her extensive oeuvre that traverses a long era of pre and post apartheid and the evolving response to it demonstrates her expertise beyond the line of protest writers. With remarkable skill and detached control over language, Gordimer explores the overpowering morality in the public sphere with great precision. She fervently opposed such lopsided perspective of a writer and maintained that a writer must be a mouthpiece of the time. Nonetheless for the liberal white writers these unfortunate incidents at the turn of the century had engendered some perplexing questions-authors like Gordimer and Livingstone turned the dilemma into the process of writing itself. Gordimer has always believed in the 'truth' of the creative imagination. 'Nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction', she commented in her celebrated 1982 public address 'Living in the Interregnum' (published in The New York Review of Books, 20 January 1983). Her extraordinary power to convey her message through realism might be conceptually influenced by George Lukacs that reveals social and public truths through the representation of private lives and moments.

Her early works reflect the liberal dilemma by mirroring the conflicting demands of subjective reflection and interiorisation, often through the use of the interior monologue. In *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* Gordimer sought to deploy a new realism in which the interiorized life of her characters was determined by the political and radical choices they were forced to make, often against their own will. Post apartheid literature is particularly more receptive to irony, play and aesthetic detachment against the resurgence of the personal with the present. In her later works she shows an increasingly complex use of fictional form. Recurring patterns of language or image combine with shifts in narrative perspective or voice to create extraordinary richness and cohesiveness. Gordimer's later novels, while still examining the nature of freedom, restriction, and betrayal, are more experimental in form, as in A *Sport of Nature* (1987) and *My Son's Story* (1990) in which Hillela's celebratory sense of identification with Africa, figured through her sexuality, is outdone by irony which suggests that overcoming racial difference involves more complex negotiations,. The "post-apartheid" novels include *None to Accompany Me*, published in 1994, the year of South Africa's first democratic elections, in which an exiled black couple return to a changing South Africa to take part in the drafting of its constitution, and in which Vera Stark, a white lawyer, attempts to right the wrongs of the past. *The House Gun* (1998) is concerned with the after-effects of apartheid, particularly the legacy of violence it bequeathed to both black and white, and which was so chillingly unearthed in the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission while *The Pickup* (2001) explores the relationship between a privileged white South African woman and an illegal Arab immigrant.

Also set in post-apartheid South Africa, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is a stimulating representation of the political conflict in South Africa. However it is evident that Coetzee shunned an explicit

engagement with history that admittedly posed a threat to his aesthetic ideology and instead resorted to highly allegorized experiences collected from the ordinary. The change in the racial hierarchy is implicit when white protagonist David Lurie's career as a professor ends with charges of sexual harassment filed against him pointing at the later reversal in the social order as Lucy's black neighbour (apparently behind the gang rape) uses post apartheid freedom to get hold of Lucy's land.

> 'What if . . . what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? . . . ' (Disgrace 158)

Lucy says this emphatically after her rape. She sees the rapists as 'debt collectors and that she must compensate for the past atrocities on the blacks. In the underlying theme of powerlessness explicated in the rape of Lucy which is deeper than subjugation and submission, Coetzee shows the detrimental effect social and political changes can have on both the privileged and the underprivileged within a flawed society, specifically in areas of race and patriarchy. 'Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing . . . No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

The theme of transition and power dynamics of domination and subordination is variedly explored with an occasional explication of the harsh realities of post apartheid South Africa. Against the backdrop of the complicity and exploitation of the post apartheid marginalized community, Coetzee explores the dynamics of evil and power evident in both blacks and whites.

Power and otherness is another predominant theme in the novels that explore the distressed relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as exemplified in *Foe*. One must reach out from the quagmire of apartheid and deconstruct ways of salvation and moral choices that must be made in a transitional society. In *Life and Times of Michael* K, the eponymous protagonist, a gardener, prefers meek subjugation and passivity over vigorous campaign, consequently voicing the traumatic experiences of the victims of apartheid without appropriating their narrative. Alternatively, Gordimer's labyrinthine and convoluted narrative is unfailingly committed to social realism and Coetzee's evasion of this very ideology has attracted virulent criticism from Gordimer and other contemporaries.

Another strain of post-apartheid writing necessitates an ethical meditation on the relationship between the past and the present and the revival of the marginal identities under the apartheid era through a metafictional and historiographic narrative. The fiction is perhaps haunted by a conscious-stricken racial past and a zealous attempt to transcend it. Similarly, under apartheid writers were expected to address the great historical issues, whereas now there has been a resurgence of the personal. Finally, under apartheid, particularly in the intense 1980s, anxiety about the future was endemic; writers are concerned predominantly with the past, in keeping with the effort towards reconciliation in the public sphere.

The opening lines of July's People introduce to the readers the domination-subordination concern that is at the crux of the narrative. The good-humored, 'decently-paid and contented' servant of the Smales', an upwardly-mobile white family begins addressing them as 'his kind has done for their kind'. In this post apartheid era, July is both their servant and pro tem 'host'. It was July who suggested they must hide in his home, and drove them along in the bakkie and so the Smales flee conflict ridden

Johannesburg to take refuge in July's village. July insists that the bakkie must be hid under the bush. Bought for pleasure, the vehicle objectifies la dolce vita spent back in the city where the only happiness for the Smales was the possession of a new thing. Living in the yard and wearing two sets of uniforms, July has served the Smales since they were married. His friends were permitted to visit him and he was allowed to live with his town woman in his room. The narrative is replete with self-explanatory and thought-provoking segments that define the dialectics of power play between the dominant and the under-represented. Maureen Smales remembers her mother calling their servant as 'our Jim' and now they lived as 'white pariah dogs in a black continent'.

Questions of race and gender are central to Gordimer's fiction. Though she herself has adapted her earlier antagonistic stance toward "liberal feminism", in which she suggested that issues of race take precedence over feminism, her more recent fiction and essays acknowledge their complex intersections. Maureen grapples with the undreamt-of reality of the other side of her leisurely life as she lights the cooking fire, washes the kids and her in dirty scum water, and washes the clothes and much more. This quest for subjectivity is often shown to end fruitlessly or ambiguously. Her often-ironic representations of such white characters echo the gap in perception between white and black South Africans, a gap that was enforced by the apartheid system and that prevented racial interaction and understanding. Such cross-cultural misreading is an essential aspect of Gordimer's characters, resulting in their sometimes stereotypical and limited perceptions of others. While some critics have suggested that this reflects Gordimer's own limitations, it is more convincingly argued to be part of her ironic figuring of black-white relations under apartheid.

As the narrative progresses the half-witted servant's

unquestioning obedience and servility is tempered by degrees as flashes of defiance surface with the gradual reversal of power. "July broke into snickering embarrassment at her ignorance of a kind of authority not understood-his". The narrative illuminates the intricacies of the relationship Maureen and July share. He has worked for Maureen for years and a tacit understanding binds them together well beyond the point and purpose of work. She understands his expressions and emotions communicated in broken English even when Bam does not. Maureen is quick to apprehend the gesture of defiance as July decides to handle their vehicle, keep the keys and soon takes it out without prior permission. The conflict over the bakkie starts when July, without seeking the permission of the Smales, drives it, with the help of his friend Daniel, to the Indian store some forty kilometers from the village, where he buys groceries and other necessities. The Smales accuse him of theft and find it hard to countenance his claim on the bakkie. 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.

Begrudgingly welcomed by July's wife and mother, Maureen takes the initiative to bridge the abysmal gap and holds the hand of the old lady while voicing a silent gratitude. With July's long absence from home, his wife had resorted to writing letters to her husband that had little content other than exchanged dialogue on money, job, and work place and when he would come back. All these years she had learned the symbiotic rule of nature—'The sun rises, the moon sets; the money must come, the man must go. While in town, she remembered sending presents for his wife and children and was gifted homespun items in return. Laboring under a misapprehension Maureen attempts to be friendly and accommodating with the mundane

surrounding and people but she is clearly an outcast in this 'other-worldly' servant's house.

The identity of July and his wife seem to be inextricably linked with the fortunes of the Smales, both of whom identify with little objects that act as an intermediary between them and the Smales, the 'bits of paper', money, the letters, the gifts that came from the other world and provided for those who could not follow July. Bam's construction of the water tank is one such aid that came from the white man. The Smales were dislocated, disoriented but the efficacy and utility of money was not lost to them. Maureen offered to pay for every little service that she availed from the cash-starved denizens of the village, even from July's wife. She suffered with an agonizing consciousness of being in a different time and place that no fiction could ever transport her to. In the dank, decrepit village hut she succumbed to an overpowering darkness only to be occasionally glazed by hand-crafted mirrors that reflected nothing.

Reflecting on old memories, Maureen sighed at the bond she shared with a black maid, Lydia; the affection and ignorance manifest in memories of her school days. A bond of humanity that knows no cultural bounds, racial discrimination nor moral dilemma of being superior or inferior.

Perfectly trustworthy as a servant, the Smales had relied on July for the last fifteen years. Maureen finds many of her belongings in July's village, things she might not have remembered after all, yet July had picked them up without her knowledge. She always wished to visit him, see where he stayed, tell her children how July builds his house and yearned for more fitting means of communication that language could not confer:

"Why is it the whites who speak their languages are never people like us, they're always the ones who have no doubts that whites are superior? If we could talk-"

Further, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, *Sisterhood:*

Political Solidarity between Women, Bell Hooks states:

> Racism is another barrier to solidarity between women . . . This has been especially true of black and white female relationships. Historically, many black women experienced white women as the white supremacist group who most directly exercised power over them, often in a manner far more brutal and dehumanizing than that of racist white men. (49)

Also she states,

> The emergence of black feminist groups led to a greater polarization of black and white women liberationists. Instead of bonding on the basis of shared understanding of woman's varied collective and individual plight in society they acted as if the distance separating their experiences from one another could not be bridged by knowledge or understanding. (151)

To Maureen this stifling reality was unimaginable, living out a life in her servant's under-resourced village, working with the women, cooking single-handedly for her family, cutting grass, going to the river to wash her; it was the most dismal picture of post apartheid to her. Most women ignored her and some, including July's wife, laughed at her. Maureen laughed back at her: 'Why should the white woman be afraid to be seen in her weaknesses, blemishes, as saw the other woman's?' *In Aint I a Woman, Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability*, Bell Hooks writes:

> To maintain the apartheid structure slavery had institutionalized, white colonizers, male and female, created

> a variety of myths and stereotypes to differentiate the status of black women from that of white women. White racists and even some black people who had absorbed the colonizer's mentality depicted the white woman as a symbol of perfect womanhood and encouraged black women to strive to attain such perfection by using the white female as her model. (121)

They shuddered at the thought of going back to the city- they never shared the ideals of the destructive white society nor did they believe in them.

In *July's People* the shifts in characters are defined by blurred and conflicting master servant relationships. Traditionally assumed roles are in a state of flux as the ambiguous moral constructions of a liberal South African white renegotiates the meaning of power.

Cross cultural differences and class consciousness leave little room for manoeuvre as strong-willed Maureen attempts to dominate July in his village; opposing perspectives clash while they struggle hard to retain well defined class boundaries. July insists he must be paid in his home and allowed to take the car as and when he wishes. July deftly circumvents arguments that question his authority over the bakkie. Tight-lipped and unyielding, he maintains poise as he serves around in their hut, helping them and bringing necessary things from the store. While the Smales are lucky to be alive and grateful to July the power dynamics visibly shifts towards the servant. Post-apartheid has far reaching consequences for them—they realize they are safe as long as the money lasts. July fails to realize that his possession comes from someone's losses and not his own earnings. While July learns driving their car and later decides to call it his own, a subtle hesitation grapples the Smales even as they recognize their gradual marginalization at the hands of

the black community: "Gratitude stuffed her crop to choking point.—We owe him everything.-"

Unlike her husband, Maureen is inadvertently reflecting on her attitude towards July and the extent of their implication in the post-apartheid era. However, despite seeing through her husband's liberalism, and despite her self-examination, Maureen's liberal views equally show cracks under pressure from the uncharted world of the interregnum.

> Women need to know that they can reject the powerful's definition of their reality- that they can do so even if they are poor, exploited or trapped in oppressive circumstances. They need to know that the exercise of this basic personal power is an act of resistance and strength. (*Changing Perspectives on Power*, Bell Hooks 90)

On one particular occasion, she commandingly sends for July to come to her hut in an apparent attempt to replay the hierarchical structure that characterized their relationship in Johannesburg: "Go and say I want to see him" (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" (68). What is hidden is obviously her ingrained sense of superiority over July.

In a pivotal argument of power struggle, Maureen directly confronts July about the car. As an employer she claims to know his whereabouts even while he lives in his village, she knows when she handed him a new object it was precisely because it was old and worn-out or no longer useful to her. Ironically, her own children, Gina and Victor are found stealing and Victor's response is a stark reminder of the reversal of fortune and its psychological impact on the characters: "He mustn't say I stole.

I just took stuff that gets thrown away, nobody wants."

July is unable to understand why she must protest as he innocently cites examples of her trust in him

> No, I can see. But I'm work for you. Me, I'm your boy, always I'm have the keys of your house. Every night I take that keys with me in my room, when you go away on holiday, I'm lock up everything . . .

Maureen reiterates Bam is not his master, they insist on a more respectful 'Sir', and July does not work for them anymore but it is difficult to explain. "African people like money. —The insult of refusing to meet her on any but the lowest category of understanding." The word 'Ellen' shatters several preconceived notions about their relationship. Flustered and unnerved, July is admittedly tainted by the mention of his town woman whom he has left behind and about whom his wife knows nothing. Insecure that Maureen might reveal the nasty truth to his wife he tries to dodge the question but finally confronts it with a dispassionate response. Later, July reminds her that the only message she can convey is that he has been working for her for fifteen years and he has been a good servant. What was conferred to him as a dignity was always a humiliation for him. An unspoken prescription that she must keep it a secret forever was clearly discernible.

On the contrary, Bam's position as the provider of the community is clearly manifest when he, the only possessor of a gun, kills a hog for everyone to eat or intelligently constructs a tank for reserving water. He wants to communicate the solace he feels for being accepted. He knows the conditions for survival-they must be given the larger share of the meat.

July takes the Smales to the village chief who has summoned them. Maureen is not very interested but must succumb to July's

orders; they are willing to do everything that is requisite for survival and hence they were driven to the chief's house whose thinly veiled references to the bombing, shooting and Bam's gun puts them at unease. After the chief's unusual interest in learning the mechanisms of Bam's gun, in an interesting turn of events Bam's gun is stolen, apparently by Daniel, July's friend.

A bitter argument ensued, both accused each other for the theft, and it was a war of the equals. July criticized her for bringing trouble even at his home. She, in turn, accused him for stealing her objects.

A very ambiguous ending closes the novel—Maureen Smales hears the thumping sound of a helicopter hovering in the sky. It is not clear who or what is in the helicopter, 'whether it holds saviours or murderers', excited people run towards it in the hope of being entertained. Maureen blindly follows the sound without making any sense of it. She runs towards the distant chuddering and runs just as a solitary animal would, for its own survival.

NOTES

1. Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (London: South End Press, 1982)
2. Bell Hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black (*London: Sheba Feminist, 1988)
3. Stephen Clingman, "*The Subject of Revolution: Burger's Daughter and July's People." The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986)
4. Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (New York: Penguin, 1986)
5. S. Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1993)
6. Michael Wade, *Nadine Gordimer*, (London: Evans Brothers, 1978)
7. John Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer, Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (London: LSU, 1985)