



Research article

The Narrative Construction of National Identity in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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Abstract

At a time when Gordimer was writing her short stories and novels which stretched over four decades beginning from the 1940s to the 1990s, several historical and political events were taking place in South Africa. Gordimer's entire oeuvre of fiction was her way of responding to those historical and political events that unfolded in the country. Many writers and critics believed that the history of the Nationalist Government from 1948 onwards has been faithfully recorded by the novels of Nadine Gordimer and they "will provide the future historian with all the evidence required to evaluate the price that has been paid by the people". (Green, 563) She published her first collection of short stories in 1949, a year after the first Nationalist Government was elected to power. Her body of work from 1949 to 2000 covers the entire period of apartheid in South Africa. Therefore, she was a writer with serious intent and meant to convey through her novels her rigid stand against apartheid. The term 'apartheid' means 'apartness', a policy meant to segregate people on the foundation of their race and colour. In *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* (1988), Gordimer noted that it was not the "problems" of her country that set her to writing; rather, it was learning to write that sent her "falling, falling through the surface of the South African way of life". (Gordimer 1988, p. 272) This paper shall attempt to study how Gordimer constructs identity in her novel *July's People* (1981). The paper posits that the most important theme in Gordimer's novels has been identity, an issue that she has been dealing with since her childhood, due to her situation as the daughter of immigrant parents, and living and writing in South Africa at a time when her country was divided based on colour.

Keywords: apartheid, identity, politics, history



Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

The novels of Nadine Gordimer follow the trajectory of her growth as a novelist along with that of her characters like the young white liberal Helen Shaw, in Gordimer's very first novel called *The Lying Days* (1953), who turns out to be politically conscious of her surroundings, to the radical Jabulile Gumede, the character in her last novel, *No Time Like the Present* (2012), who later

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becomes a lawyer for the Justice Centre in post-apartheid South Africa. As a white person living in a predominantly black community, Nadine Gordimer always held a minority status. Since she was a white, she was naturally distanced from the blacks. Yet she harboured a sense of affinity with the blacks and their struggle to achieve equality and freedom and therefore, her liberal and later radical views alienated her from the whites. Therefore, this search for an identity, by the white as well as the black characters, is intrinsic in her novels. She took her responsibility to the community as a writer earnestly. In *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* (1988), Gordimer noted that it was not the "problems" of her country that set her to writing; rather, it was learning to write that sent her "falling, falling through the surface of the South African way of life". (p. 272) Louise Yelin, noted that when other white writers chose to leave the dwellings where they were born or grew up to live in other countries, Gordimer chose to stay in South Africa and "be (or become) a South African writer". (Yelin, 1998, p.16) According to her, Gordimer's national identity is that she is a South African and she identifies with it. In the essay called, "Where do Whites fit in?" which was published in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, Gordimer suggests "that whites who want to belong to a multiracial society might make a place for themselves by improvising or by regarding themselves as immigrants in a new country". (p. 32-34). She states that even though she was born in South Africa she is still known as the daughter of immigrants. Her mother hailed from England while her father came from Lithuania. According to Gordimer, her parents "weren't the sort of people who called Europe home but that doesn't help in the opinion of some whites, it is necessary to be able to trace one's ancestry to the Voortrekkers or the 1820 British settlers to be accepted as South African". (Gordimer 1959, p 275) This paper shall attempt to study how Gordimer constructs identity in her novel *July's People*. The paper posits that identity has always been an important theme in Gordimer's novels due to her situation where she did not feel at 'home' in South Africa which shall be dwelled upon at length in the paper. She writes about the struggle that her characters go through to attain political or racial rather than personal freedom, in *July's People*, Maureen Smales, a white woman, aims to construct her identity. The interregnum is such a period where the people were standing at the threshold of a new beginning, yet they were hesitant and wary, scarred by a bitter history of apartheid laws and segregation. It is at this juncture that Gordimer tried to 'imagine' a nation where power is reversed and for the whites, their very homes would turn into the strange place or the 'unhomely' as Bhabha calls it. Bam Smales was confronted with the strange predicament of trying to find a safe place far away from the turmoil which was unimaginable and frightening at the same time: "Everywhere is the same. They are chasing the whites out. The whites are fighting them. All those towns are the same. Where could he run with his family?" (p. 24) Bhabha in his essay titled "The World and the Home" noted that "in the House of Fiction you can hear, today, the deep stirring "unhomely...something of the estranging sense of the relocation the home and the world in an unhallowed place". (Bhabha 1992, p.142) For Maureen, her former servant July's home which becomes her refuge is such a place for her, 'an unhallowed place'. It was strange and unfamiliar as Bhabha stated. The novel opens at a moment when July brings in two pink glass cups of tea to the Samles's room without a knock because there was "no door", at seven in the morning (p.1) which becomes the "unhomely moment" that approaches quietly as one's own shadow. (Bhabha 1992, p.142) The home does not belong to Maureen and Bam Smales but to July, their black servant and they have to live in the room provided by July in his village during the turbulent period. According to Woodward in the book called *Questioning identity: gender, class,*

nation, "We are not born with an identity, but it emerges in several different forms through a series of identifications which combine and emerge in an infinite number of forms so that there is never one fixed coherent identity but several in play". (Kath Woodward 2000, p.13) According to Woodward, identity is a dynamic and complex idea that arises from several kinds of identification. She underlines that various identities coexist and change over time rather than a single, permanent identity. This concept contends that identity is a dynamic and ever-evolving construct, challenging the idea of a permanent or essential self. The novel, *July's People* has an epigraph which has been taken from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* which reflects the transition of the interregnum, "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." (*July's People*) According to Dominic Head, the Smales couple have no "meaningful sense of identity" (Head 1994, p.123) and they are displaced from their white neighbourhood. The revolution forebodes a difficult and dark future for the whites. According to Bill Ashcroft et al. in the book *Empire Writes Back*, the search for identity is one of the influences of colonialism. Margaret Wetherell in 'The Field of Identity Studies' from *The Sage Handbook of Identities* states that in the most basic sense, the study of identities is about what Avtar Brah (1996) would refer to as "names and looks". (Wetherell 2010, p. 3) Ernest Renan in his essay called "What is a Nation?" in *Nation and Narration* by Bhabha has stated that "Nations are not everlasting. They have a beginning and an end". (Renan, p.10) As Ernest Gellner argues in his book *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) because nations are constructed by people, like buildings and other structures, they are subject to instability. Thus, the country represents an idea. In his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Benedict Anderson defines the nation first and foremost as "an imagined political community". (p. 6) The reason for this is that "even in the smallest nation, its citizens will never meet, know, or even hear most of their fellow citizens, but each one of them will always have an image of their communion in their minds." People believe they are part of a larger group and that many others share a "deep, lateral comradeship" (7) with them. Pramod Nayar in *Postcolonialism: A Guide For The Perplexed* (2010) has noted that:

the marginalization of specific groups in postcolonial nations after acquiring political independence has resulted in cultural dissent, fundamentalisms, secessionist-separatist movements and political unrest. Postcolonial nations replicate structures of oppression and inequality and create subalterns of their own". (Nayar 2010, p. 93)

Nayar goes on to say that the nation undoubtedly leads the way in postcolonial thinking. In postcolonial writings from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and South America, arguments and disagreements about what defines a country's "authentic" culture, conflicts over novel kinds of colonialism, and the very tangible internal colonialism that results in the marginalisation of certain groups are common themes. (Nayar 2010, p100)

According to Yelin, the novels of Gordimer participate in the conceptually ambivalent process of writing the nation. These novels, and therefore their performative nationality, are susceptible to educational imperatives as well as the whims of race, gender, genre, and geography, even while they construct, improvise, and embed themselves in growing national cultures. (Yelin 1998, p18) Maureen struggles with her identity as she is confronted by a huge difference between living a life in a white suburb to trying to adjust to a life in the squalid neighbourhood of July's village.

No fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know, could not have imagined or discovered through imagination. They had nothing. (p. 35)

Maureen cannot acclimatise herself to her situation because historically the whites have always been the superior race in the country and they were always the master and wielded power and authority. But now that they are no longer in a position of power, she finds it difficult to accept the truth. Her bourgeois upbringing gave her a strong sense of identity, which now seemed to be shattered in the face of the revolution. Because of July, their former servant, she and her family are now dependent on him, "which creates a reversal of the power relationship". (Head 1994, p.125) The lives of July and Martha, who is July's wife, also changed due to this sudden relocation of the white family to their hut. Since earlier July was assured of a monthly salary by his masters, this sudden change in their situation brought about by their arrival, is also difficult to accept given that the monthly paycheck does not seem possible now. As July asks, "You are not going pay me, this month?" (p. 87) to be greeted by a reply from a shocked Maureen, "Pay you! She glowed and flashed". (p. 87) He reminds her that he had slaved for them for fifteen years taking care of their kitchen and house so that he could look after his home, wife and children. His identity is that of a worker who works unseen and unheard in the white house and is allowed a leave every two years. That is why Martha conceives a child every two years. According to Bruce King, in *July's People* the reader, like Maureen, knows little about July's world, his thoughts, his relationship with his wife and the woman with whom he lived, and his society at home. The real identity of July is revealed only towards the end of the novel and Bam and Maureen come to know that July's real name is 'Mwawate' (p.120). Even though Maureen attempts to familiarise herself with the village people and July's wife and mother she remains an outsider till the end of the novel. Brendon Nicholls in the first chapter of the book, *Nadine Gordimer's July's People*, called "Texts and Contexts" states that Gordimer wrote *July's People* from an unusual position within a divided national culture. She made use of her position as a white writer in South Africa. However, she was by no means representative of her political class when she wrote *July's People* in terms of political consciousness. Rather, Gordimer had realised that the mid-1970s turning point during the struggle required approval to armed black political struggle. (Nicholls 2011, p.19) M. Keith Booker in the *Cambridge Companion to the African novel* notes that South African novels of the post-apartheid era tend to write about the contemporary situation, though a few novels tend to write about the apartheid period. (Booker 2009, p.172) Rowland Smith observes that when Maureen realises that she can no longer go home, to her familiar surroundings and finds it extremely difficult to accept the role reversal, where July is the master and the white Smales family has to depend on him for their survival and when the last vestige of pride, their bakkie was occupied by July without even taking their permission, she finds her liberal views shattered and therefore, "when she hears the loud noise of a helicopter, she magnetically gravitates towards it, seeking it out, where it has landed beyond the river, crosses the river, and runs towards it. She runs" (p.160). Clingman terms her running away as "running from old structures and relationships," to seeking a new identity. (Clingman 2011, p.114) Throughout the novel, Maureen adopts a liberal stand; while she voluntarily accepts their new situation, she also aspires to break free from apartheid by the book's conclusion. According to Maureen, she thinks that the interregnum period, the time of uncertainty that they were in, does not hold any promise, She prefers to look at what lies ahead. Ali Erritouni believes that "Her run may indicate 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". (Erritouni 2006, p.75)

In the book, Gordimer also addresses July, the black servant, and his evolving identity. He assumes the position of the master as he provides refuge to his former employers in his modest mud-walled home from being a silent servant in the Smales household for so many years. However, he also shows his dominance by taking their automobile and leaving the village when necessary. He is perturbed by their dilemma and tries to reason with his mother that he cannot refuse to house them in the village even though they are at risk of being found out by the revolutionaries. At the cost of betraying the black revolutionaries, July tries to make the family feel at home. Yet, Nadine Gordimer in *Telling Times*, states that no black man can have a home in a white city and no sense of urgency will pursue him to move into a house in which the whites live. Despite working for fifteen years in a white household, July cannot think of building a home for himself in a white suburb. Though we find Gordimer's idea of a country where the blacks and the whites are treated as equals to be a distant dream, when July welcomes the Smales family to his humble abode to save his white masters from any harm, there is the hope of such a nation instilled by the author. July refuses to let Maureen go to gather food with the village women because she is not used to the routine and thus uses his power over her. The three children of Bam and Maureen, Victor, Gina, and Royce, have to adapt to the customs of the nation they call home. Ali Erritouni recalls Bhabha when he states that:

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 current impasses in a past of inequality and complicities and sets its eyes on a potentially promising future that may break the unbearable deadlock of apartheid. (Erritouni 2006, p. 81)

Similar to her writing, Gordimer's persistent goal in politics was to observe events as they happened in front of her and then document them in writing. Gordimer is a member of a minority inside a minority in South Africa. The majority, who are primarily black people, used to live under the system of racial oppression and economic exploitation. But South Africa is comprised of both blacks and whites and contained within that small white world is another group of whites, like Nadine Gordimer, who are opposed to this system of racial discrimination and stand with the country's majority. Dominic Head while writing about Gordimer's literary identity stated that the Black Consciousness movement which flourished in the 1970s before and after the Soweto riots of 1976-7, provoked Gordimer into a narrowing reformulation of her national identity as a white South African. This is essentially the core of "white consciousness," which evolved in opposition to the distinct black consciousness concept and which briefly piqued Gordimer's interest.

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