

**DEPICTION OF WHITE POWER: NADINE GORDIMER'S
*JULY'S PEOPLE***

Dr. Mohd Farhan Saiel
Assistant Professor
Department of Languages
Integral University,
Lucknow, U.P. India

Dr. Aareena Nazneen
Assistant Professor
Department of Languages
Integral University,
Lucknow, U.P. India

Abstract

The present paper intends to represent the cultures and identities of black and white people in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* which had been banned by the apartheid government. *July's People* not only brings to life and the struggles of race and gender as a whole, but it also scrutinizes the cultural relationships and power struggles between the two classes of the people (black and white) in the core of South Africa. However, being written during the apartheid epoch predicts the collapse of this system which in reality happened thirteen years after the writing of the novel, in 1994. Thus, the work of fiction shows the approach of black insurgency which had not yet been carried out. According to Brighton J. Uledi-Kamanga in his book *Cracks in the Wall: Nadine Gordimer's Fiction and the Irony of Apartheid*, he describes "*July's People* is the first novel in which Gordimer depicts the decline of white supremacy in South Africa" (P 119). In this study, it will show how race plays an important role in dividing people into superior and inferior groups and amidst this, it shows how the power structure shifts from the former structure to a fragmented structure and how the characters adapt to the changing situations.

Key Words: Culture, Identity, Social Segregation, Post-Apartheid, South Africa, White Power and Struggles of the race.

Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is a part of a person's self-conception and is related to national, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social groups that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual but also of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity. In psychology, sociology, and anthropology, identity is a person's conception and expression of their own or self-identity and others' individuality or group affiliations such as national identity and cultural identity. Cultural studies engaged cultural analysis that was initially developed by British academics in the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. It has been subsequently taken up and transformed by scholars from many disciplines around the world. Cultural studies are frankly and even fundamentally interdisciplinary and it can sometimes be seen as an anti-disciplinary. As cultural studies scholar, Toby Miller has written in his book *A Companion to Cultural Studies*, "Cultural studies is tendency across disciplines, rather than a discipline itself."

There are various modern cultural critics and social theorists who have investigated cultural identity as Matthew Arnold in his book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in which he defines as "Culture is properly described as the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection." with anarchy, the prevalent mood of England's then new democracy, which lacks standards and a sense of direction. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), he focuses on the psychological and psychiatric investigation of the dehumanizing effects of colonization upon the individual and the nation along with he discusses the broader social, cultural, and political implications of establishing a social movement for the decolonization of a person and of a people. He says:

The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. Perhaps we haven't sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today (P 208).

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), in this book, Said examines Western representations of the Middle Eastern societies and cultures. Said's central concern in *Orientalism* is the multiple relationships between the act of writing and cultural politics, language, and power. He attempts to show how Western journalists, fiction writers, and scholars helped to build up a prevalent and hostile image of the Eastern cultures as inferior, stagnant, and degenerate. He also attempts to show the extent to which these representations spread through the Western culture. The West exploited these representations to justify their imperialist policies in the Middle East. He describes:

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if

one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilizatrice.

In recent decades, a new form of identification has emerged which breaks down the understanding of the individual as a coherent whole subject into a collection of various cultural identifiers. These cultural identifiers may be the result of various conditions including location, gender, race, history, nationality, language, sexuality, religious belief, ethnicity, aesthetics and even food and clothes. It is also noted that an individual's cultural arena or place where one lives, impact the culture that person chooses to abide by. The surroundings, the environment, the people in these places play a factor in how one feels about the culture they wish to adopt. Many immigrants find the need to change their culture in order to fit into the culture of most citizens in the country. It can conflict with an immigrant's current belief in their cultural identity and might pose a problem, as the immigrant feels compelled to choose between the two presenting cultures. Eliot defines in his book *Christianity and Culture* "culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living" (P 100).

Culture is a process and it is not a fixed entity. Many factors interact in this complex process. Race, gender, socioeconomic factors, ethnicity, sexual differences all these are involved in the culture. There were anti-colonial political movements which were responsible for getting independence and local self-governance for those countries that had been colonized to the foreign rule. Post-colonialism is used to refer to all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. In other words, it analyses the literature that was affected by the imperial process, the literature that grew in response to colonial domination, right from the time of contact between the colonizer and the colonized down to the contemporary situation. There is an inherent clash between the native indigenous pre-colonial cultures and the culture imposed on the natives by the imperial forces. Cultural colonization still exists and there has been not completed decolonization. Much of postcolonial works are concerned with the loss of post-colonial identity.

Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014) was a representative South African novelist and the Nobel laureate of 1991 has successfully depicted the contemporary reality in fiction in artistic terms. The novelist by holding a mirror to South Africa's political, cultural and emotional attitudes represents the language of the people, their culture, and tradition by introducing new avenues of experience for the readers. The motifs of the novels cover the whole range of human life and activity, as well as every known manifestation of physical nature. She not only represents the events and sayings of the people of South Africa, but the rules deduced from the observation of the conditions of men's lives are included in her records. As a white South African writer, the contribution of Gordimer to the liberation of the Blacks is remarkable. She has been a spokesperson for the apartheid system which was set up in South Africa in 1948. For this reason, many of her writings were banned in South Africa as they directly provoked open criticisms of the politics of the South African apartheid regime. Brighton J. Uledi-Kamanga in his book *Cracks in the Wall: Nadine Gordimer's Fiction and the Irony of Apartheid*, he tells that According to Gordimer, she does "not write about apartheid, but about people who happen to live under that system" (P 16).

Nadine Gordimer exhibited a clear picture of South Africa in her own words and it is known that she lived in the white city of Johannesburg, the biggest city in South Africa. Around the white city, particularly to the west and north, is another city, black Johannesburg. This clear picture of black and white is blurred only a little at the edges by the presence of small Colored (mixed blood) and Indian communities, also segregated, both from each other and the rest. We

shall see Africans in every house in the white city, of course, for every house has its servants quarters, built not less than a certain minimum regulation distance from the white house. Sophisticated Africans call this backyard life living dogs-meat closer to the kennel and the outhouses than to the humans in the house. But no black man has his home in the white city; neither wealth nor honor or distinction of any kind could entitle him to move into a house in the street where she or any other white persons lived. So it easily happens that thousands of white people lived their whole lives without ever exchanging a word with a black man who is like themselves, on their own social and cultural level; and for them, the whole African people is composed of servants and the great army of boys who cart away or deliver things the butcher's boy, the grocer's boy, the milk boy, the dust boy. On the basis of this experience, the novel shows that it is simple for white men and women to deduct that the black men and women are an inferior race. But when Maureen and her husband had to live in her servant's house. Maureen Speaking to July in a heated argument, she apologizes for not recognizing his feelings during the time when she was his boss. Yet while she acknowledges her ignorance to how he may have felt, her apology is not entirely sincere. Rather than being truly sorry for the fact that her condescension may have offended him, she becomes offended herself for the fact that he had never let on that he found her condescending. Maureen narrates that "If I offended you, if I hurt your dignity, if what I thought was my friendliness, the feeling I had for you--if that hurt your feelings... I know I didn't know and I should have known" (Chapter 9). The Black writers struggled against the confines of race and sex for freedom and selfhood. The fighting spirit of the Black writers endured all adversities and uncovered their ordeal through writing. Black literature in South Africa began with the oral tradition, augmented by song, a powerful tool of community fellowship and communication in Africa. For the sake of broader reach, the majority of the Black writers wrote in English.

It was a conscious effort on the part of the South African writers who desire for emancipation from the literary stereotype of the western writers. Through their writings, they erased the prejudices and preoccupations of the westerners who distorted the South African literature. Among them, Gordimer, the most applauded writer of South Africa has carved out a special place for herself through her writings. The contemporaries, who occupy a prominent place along with Gordimer such as Bessie Head, Alan Paton, J.M. Coetzee, Andre Brink, Es'kia Mphahlele and Chinua Achebe complement the ideas and views of Gordimer in their writings. She is recognized all over the world as a representative voice from South Africa which courageously reveals the political turmoil, social segregation of the people and exploration of the effects of the apartheid system, on the entire population of the Whites, the Blacks and the Colored people of South Africa.

Black men do all the physical labor in our country because no white man wants to dig a road or load a truck. But for every kind of work a white man wants to do, there are sanctions and job reservations to shut the black man out. In the building trade, and in the industry, the Africans are the unskilled and semi-skilled workers, and they cannot, by law, become anything else. They cannot serve behind the counters in the shops, and cannot be employed alongside white clerks. Wherever they work, they cannot share the washrooms or the canteens of the white workers. The real life of any community restaurants, bars, hotels, clubs, and coffee bars has no place for the African man or woman. They serve in all these, but they cannot come in and sit down. Art galleries, cinemas, theatres, golf courses, and sports clubs, even the libraries are closed to them. In the post offices and all other government offices, they are served at segregated counters.

As above circumstances mentioned, Gordimer delineates:

They had nothing. In their houses, there was nothing. At first. You had to stay in the dark of the huts a long while to make out what was on the walls. In the wife's hut a wavy pattern of broad white and ochre bands. In others - she did not know whether or not she was welcome where they dipped in and out all day from dark to light like swallows - she caught a glimpse of a single painted circle, an eye or target, as she saw it. In one dwelling where she was invited to enter there was the tail of an animal and a rodent skull, dried gut, dangling from the thatch.....Mine workers had been coming from out of these places for a long, long time, almost as long as the mines had existed. She read the brass arm-plaque: Boss Boy (Chapter 5).

The humblest laborer will find his life the meaner for being black. If he was a white man, at least there would be no ceiling to his children's ambitions. But it is in the educated men that want and need stand highest on the wrong side of the color bar. Whatever he achieves as a man of learning, *as a man* he still has as little say in the community as a child or a lunatic. Outside the gates of the university (soon he may not be able to enter them at all; the two open universities are threatened by legislation that will close them to all who are not white) white men will hail him as a boy. When the first African advocate was called to the Johannesburg Bar, just over a year ago, government officials raised objections to his robing and disrobing in the same chamber as the white advocates. His colleagues accepted him as a man of the law, but the laws of apartheid saw him only as a black man. Neither by genius nor cunning, by sainthood or thuggery, is there a way in which a black man can earn the right to be regarded as any other man.

Some Africans are born, into their segregated townships, light enough to pass as Colored. They play Colored for the few privileges better jobs, better housing, more freedom of movement that this brings, for the nearer they can get to being white, the less restricted their life is. A fair skin is the equivalent of a golden spoon in the child's mouth; in other countries colored people may be tempted to play white for social reasons, but in South Africa a pale face and straight hair can gain the basic things a good school, acceptance instead of rejection all the way along the line. It is the ambition of many colored parents to have a child light enough to cross the color bar and live the precarious life of pretending to be white; their only fear is that the subterfuge will be discovered.

Black and white get to know each other in spite of and under the strain of a dozen illegalities. They can never meet in town, for there is nowhere they can sit and talk together. The legal position about receiving African guests in a white house is unclear; They do have their friends in their houses, of course, but there is always the risk that a neighbor may trump up a complaint, to which the police would always be sympathetic. When they offer an African guest a drink, they break the law unequivocally; the exchange of a glass of beer between there and his hands could land them both in the police court on a serious charge. Officially, they are not supposed to enter an African location without a permit, and when we go to visit friends in a black township we take the chance of being stopped by the police, who are looking for gangsters or caches of liquor, but they will do their duty to apartheid on the side. According to Nadine Gordimer, she described an event of marriage ceremony that she was one of a small group of whites who had to get up and leave the table at the wedding reception of an African medical student; a white official of the gold-mining company for whom the bride's father worked, and on whose property his house was, drove up to inform them that their invitations to the wedding were not sufficient to authorise their presence in living quarters provided for Africans. Living apart,

black and white are destroying themselves morally in the effort. Living together, it is just possible that they might survive white domination, black domination, and all the other guides that hide them from each other and discover themselves to be identically human. The least they could all count on would be the recognition that they have no more and no less reason to fear each other than other men have.

The famous novel, *July's People* published in 1981 by Nadine Gordimer. Brendon Nicholls, in his book *Nadine Gordimer's July's People: A Routledge Study Guide* describes the war that, "*July's People* is based on a fictional civil war where the time frame is not quite clear to us but may be assumed to be somewhere between the 80's or 90's" (P 1). The story centers on the experience of Maureen and Bam Smales, a white South African couple, as they flee from Johannesburg with their children and with the aid of their black servant, named July. They seek refuge in a remote village under the shelter and protection of July who had been served them for fifteen years. This is where they embark on a new journey that would leave them clueless of the drastic alterations they face in July's village. This shortly will turn into a state of ambivalence between the old and new regimes where the societal values and norms become difficult to understand. As July brings them to his home to live in hiding with his family, the complicated nature of interracial relationships is challenged. Across the country, the hierarchy between whites and blacks have been reversed. For the most part, this has led to the widespread killing. The roles of the Smales family and July have similarly been reversed, but in this case, the black man protects the white people. The novel at once addressed the broader political conditions of South Africa, while also closely examining the nature of interracial friendships. As the roles between the Smales couple and July are reversed (he becomes the one with the power while they depend on him), Gordimer explores the nature of power and the possibility of equality. As tension rises between Maureen and July, one of the main obstacles to finding equal footing comes from Maureen herself as her latent mistrust of black benevolence rises to the surface of her consciousness. Though Maureen and Bam consider themselves liberal people and supporters of black liberation, Maureen grew up in apartheid conditions. Her childhood memories return and cause her to doubt the man who is saving her family.

In the beginning, the novel draws a curtain between the Smales family and July in which master-servant relationship can be seen. This is seen in the lines, when "July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind has always done for their kind" (Chapter 1). This statement at once divides people into factions where one has to serve the other for a living. The passage then goes on with July entering the Smales room to serve tea in bed, "No knock; but July, their servant, their host bringing two pink glass cups of tea and a small tin of condensed milk, jaggedly-opened, specially for them, with a spoon in it" (Chapter 1). Here, Gordimer clearly gives us concrete images of the master-servant relationship where the Smales are whites and privileged, the self whereas on the other hand July being the black native who brings "the tea-tray with black hands smelling of Lifebuoy soap" (Chapter 1). It is marginalized as the other. The cause of this division is clearly a matter of race. Apart from race, it is the theme of materialism and possession that becomes directly associated with the power of the Smales in the white society. At the beginning of the black revolution, ownership and economic prosperity were seen to be the basis of white authority. Whites lived a luxurious life. The Smales thus went on hunting trips and could afford to entertain their friends by throwing lavish parties. They owned "A seven-roomed house and a swimming-pool" (Chapter 5) and a bakkie. The bakkie reflected their upper-class status as it was bought not out of necessity but for Bam's personal contentment on his fortieth birthday where the narrator comments "the vehicle was bought for pleasure, as

some women are said to be made for pleasure” (Chapter 2). Moreover, Gordimer makes it quite evident that the Smales are happy in spending money and “they had no interest in feeding rabbits” (Chapter 2). The happiness comes from their privilege in the society that gives them the power to rule over others and once this privilege is torn apart they become greatly shocked at the adverse situation where they have lost their powerful position as colonizers, and are trying to adjust with this inversion of the power-play. According to Dominic Head in his book *Nadine Gordimer: Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature.*, “the situation of the Smales’ new dependence on their former servant creates a simple reversal of the power relationship, but it also produces a complex analysis of the network of forces that have created these individuals and the matrix in which they interact” (P 125).

It is here that the merging of the whites and blacks reflect a huge gap in the social structure. The whites are stereotyped by the villagers in July’s village as they are constantly referred to as the whites. For them, whites correspond to being superior, powerful but nonetheless suspicious creatures. The creation of suspicion is probably because of the native’s lack of contact with the white people. It is apparent when Gordimer explains July’s mother’s feeling when she comes in contact with white skinned people for the first time. The labeling of the whites as colonizers stereotype them as deceiving, cunning and harmful to the native blacks and for this reason July’s mother fears that they are no longer safe with the whites in their midst; she says “What will the white people do to us now, God must save us ... White people. They are very powerful, my son. They are very clever. You will never come to the end of the things they can do” (Chapter 4).

The communication gap is present in almost all matters of importance such as education, economic, and culture but most importantly through language. Not only are the blacks unable to understand the whites but the same occurs to the Smales who fail to acquire the native African language thus failing to understand. However, July’s and the Smales terms of communication were mostly “based on orders and responses, not the exchange of ideas and feelings” (Chapter 13) thus implying that language proved to be functional and kept both races at a distance from one another.

July’s village creates a sense of awe in the Smales. They cannot relate their luxurious city life to this new rural setting. In this natural atmosphere, there is a constant presence of foul filth, muddy huts, dung floors, dirty water where “rivers carried the risk of bilharzia infection” (Chapter 2). This conveys the impression that such a setting is integral and intrinsic to black life. But for the whites, it becomes a huge change that they cannot adapt to.

Bam Smales and his wife Maureen Smales, despite trying to establish a firm ground in this African land, and presumably with the people as well, somehow turn out to be victims of the society since neither of them is committed to the societal values and what the society expects of them. As a result, they remain outsiders and alienated subjects. In their relocation, Gordimer tries to underscore the difficulties and adversities that white families encounter in the interregnum: “they might find they had lived out their whole lives as they were, born white pariah dogs in a black continent” (Chapter 2). Hence the Smales are no longer living their former Euro-centric life instead they have to adjust to the native ethnic and cultural values. As a consequence, disintegration in their characteristics starts.

On the other hand, it is their children who seem to adapt to the new structure quite easily. They start playing like the native children; here Gina befriends a native boy named Nyiko whom she becomes closely attached to. Victor and Royce, the sons get involved in games the locals play. They “were playing with skeletal carts, home-made of twisted wire by the black children,

they had exchanged for the model cars from Victor's racing track"..... and Gina "was eating mealie-meal with her fingers" (Chapter 6). Maureen has no longer to be bothered about her children for "they knew how to look after themselves, like the black children" (Chapter 16). Besides she thought that all her children had acquired immunity against diseases just like the native children and probably they had.

Stephen Clingman in his book *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* states:

both Maureen and her husband Bam, having fled for safety with their servant July to his rural home while revolution shakes the rest of South Africa, are in a way too old for any immediate transformations but it is mainly in their children that the novel's cultural hopes are invested (P 17).

So it may be the children who will show a positive outcome in the whole story.

Furthermore, Gordimer's choice of title of the novel is quite an ambiguous one since one is left asking oneself who are July's people. It could be his native people who he is cultural, socially associated to, but on the other hand, it could be the Smales family where he has spent fifteen years serving them. The progression of the novel slowly shows how Gordimer places July as the leader of the Smales family thus setting them under his control. Initially, July becomes an object of the upper middle-class gaze. Fanon's explanation of how the body is made black by becoming the object of the hostile white gaze. Hence the white gaze, the gaze from the perspective of a person who is white, objectifies the other body. This objectification of the other disregards their experience of the world, inflicting one gaze over the other. Fanon implies that the process of this othering is done through the race. Therefore the white family is unaware of July's true identity despite living together for so many years. Moreover, they have eradicated July's real name Mwawate where "July was a name for the whites to use; "fifteen years they had not been told what the chiefs subject really was called" (Chapter 15). July's native name preserves his ethnic identity thus giving him an Afrocentric identity. It is only when the whites are in his territory that there is a reversal in roles; that of master-servant, colonizer-colonized relationship. Initially, he appears to be "their servant, their host.... He remains the white family's savior, but as time goes on they become his people" (Chapter 1). Thus he takes on the role of the colonizer where there is visible as Christopher Heywood describes in his book *Nadine Gordimer: Writers and their work* that "transformation from servant to protector to commander" (P 4). He stops being submissive, timid and respectful to the Smales. He takes possession of the bakkie from the Smales and learns to drive in a few days. Consequently, the Smales become his subjects and have to abide by his way of living. Such a perspective is seen in Mongane Wally Serote's statement in Louise Yelin's book *From the margins of empire: Christina Stead, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer* that "blacks must lead and whites must follow, blacks must talk and whites must listen" (P 134-135).

Maureen imagined herself to be an enlightened and liberal white South African, treating her servants well and refusing to call them boy, but the experience of being at the mercy of July in his village had made her confront her unaccepted prejudices and sense of entitlement. Trapped between the roles of a woman and a colonizer, Maureen has to sacrifice her own desire and selfhood. Her superior racial identity makes her self but her inferior gender status marks her as the gendered other. The male-governed South Africa allowed men keep as states by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* "in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the Patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of

law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other” (P 171).

Maureen is wholly dependent on July as he has helped her family escape, providing them with food and refuge. Being dependent on July does not make her give up her previous attitude as being his madam. She cannot totally accept the new settings and rules of July’s village. She stills acts as if July is her servant as her egoistic voice takes control. She accuses him of thievery, asks him to return the bakkie keys, orders him to go and find Bam’s lost gun and bring it back. Moreover, she threatens to reveal July’s relationship with other women back in the city to his wife. Such a behavior angers July who has forever been loyal to her. With his new power to act, he tells her that she should “tell everybody you trust your good boy. You are good madam, you got good boy” (Chapter 9). July is neither completely opposed to the Smales authority, nor does he completely act in accordance with it. July perceives the fact that he has been discriminated and mistreated by Maureen. He no longer feels the need to serve anyone as he has power now. This abrupt shift of power leaves Maureen confused, fractured, ambivalent and fearful. “She had never been afraid of a man. Now comes fear ... from this one, from him. It spread from him” (Chapter 13).

The final line, when she runs towards the unknown helicopter without concerning herself about anyone or anything perhaps leaves it up to the reader to decide exactly where Maureen is going, what future she is running to, and away from what past. As Nancy Bailey points out in her article “Living without the Future: Nadine Gordimer’s July’s People”, “What Maureen runs to is a return to the illusion of identity created by a world of privilege and possession. What she runs from is her failure to find any creative source for re-birth” (P 222). She is desperate to flee from the societal structure as she no longer understands her position within it. Gordimer explains her run “like a solitary animal at the season when animals neither seek a mate nor take care of young, existing only for their lone survival, the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility” (Chapter 20).

To sum up, Nadine Gordimer deals with the inter-racial love, discriminatory labor and ‘strike laws’, teenage pregnancy, mother-daughter bitterness, and postcolonial hangovers. As a white writer, Gordimer experiences the difficulty of being accepted in the society as a spokesperson for the civil laws, which she confirms in *Living in Hope and History*, “I am not saying, nor do I believe, that whites cannot write about black, or blacks about whites” (P 46). Cultural conflicts and political dogmas to find a genuine depiction in the novels. Gordimer is a representative South African novelist who has successfully portrayed in artistic terms the contemporary reality in fiction.

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