

Colonial Travel Narrative to Present Transculturation and Hybridity in

Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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Abstract

Several South African intellectuals used their writings as powerful weapons against the racial segregationist movement Apartheid that they judged unfair and inhumane. Nadine Gordimer's devotement to this scholarly struggle is basic in most of her novels, critical essays and short stories. Despite historical context displayed in her works, this world-renowned writer has kept her strong artistic individuality shown throughout her literary style. This paper explores the way in which the relation between history and literature appears reflected in her work *July's People* (1981). In this work, Nadine Gordimer records the experiences of Black South African migrants and the falsehood of the liberal bourgeois whites by refiguring colonial travel narrative genre through the plot of Black revolt and White flight to the homelands to offer a nuanced view of cultural exchanges occurring between Black and White South Africans resulting in transculturation and hybridity between the two different socio-cultural communities.

Key words: *colonial travel narrative – Black revolt – White Bourgeois hypocrisy - transculturation - hybridity*

As a writer and social critic, Nadine Gordimer tries to bring issues to light about injustice in South Africa. She works with a range of literary forms to examine the realities of social life in her country; she particularly explores how literary forms can be used to scrutinize cultural biases and explore social categories that gave rise to the policy of Apartheid. Gordimer believes that original Black South African cultures were permanently transformed by not only Apartheid but colonialism and capitalism too as she argues in *The Black Interpreters*:

[...] a people struggling under the triple burden of industrialization, colour, and class discrimination, in a capitalist economy which orders their lives as if they were still living in a

feudal age. It is as a people dealing with the problems of power that the rest [of the Africans] are shown, exercising the right even to misgovern themselves. (Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters: Notes on African Writing* 7)

She believes that writers possess the power to make a change as she restates in her 1982 interview with Boyers, Blaise, Diggory, and Elgrably that “writers have very strange powers of identifying themselves with other people and lives different from their own. I think they are strangely androgynous beings as well” (Seymour 211), (Gordimer, *A writer’s freedom. Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950–2008*).

In *July’s People* Gordimer employs the plot of the Black revolt and White flight to summon different narrative genres: colonial travel, bourgeois domestic, gothic and holocaust narrative genres to criticise Apartheid (Williamson 79). The main concern of this paper is to depict the elements of colonial travel narrative genre in her novel *July’s People*, usually referred to as a literal prophecy of Black revolt in South Africa, a novel about a ‘figurative abdication’ suggested in the concept of the interregnum itself: one reign has come to an end while a new rule has not begun yet and without a leadership, then “false moves, confused sympathies, mistaken anxieties” take place in the novel (Folks 116). The paper shows how perfectly she could master the narrative elements specific to that genre to investigate social, cultural, racial and economic contexts and use them as a subtext to her work in order to expose her readers to the injustices of Apartheid and the specificities of South Africa brought by that political system in complicity with colonisation and capitalism. Based on this choice and her writing genuine, Gordimer could produce a cultural and a literary ‘in-betweeness’ (Williamson 82).

Emblematic figure of the colonial travel genre, the colonial traveller, is presented through two types of travellers; result of colonialism and capitalism in South Africa: (1) the helpless Whites fleeing into the bush for security and (2) the Black men forced to ‘travel’ to the urban and mining centre for work either on semi-annual leaves or by short term contracts. In her depiction of these new ‘explorers’, she presents a cultural in-betweeness throughout which she criticises bourgeois liberalism, imperialism, and capitalism as shown by the segregationist system practices.

In this cultural in-between space, Gordimer confronts two opposing socio-cultural systems: Black and White or indigenous and foreign; it is a space where the refigured colonizer confronts the refigured colonized and a traditional power dynamic is set between the outsider (white traveller) and the insider (native) throughout the plot in her narrative. The plot of the Whites fleeing Black insurgency into the bush reminds us of the Whites travelling and exploring the interior of the colonial narratives. Related to this central plot, we observe her use of further elements: anti-slavery critique, survival stories, social descriptions, hunting tales, myths, military

memory, common history, ethnography and racial love (Pratt 91) to criticise Apartheid. Gordimer believes that cultural power struggle is in the heart of political and economic power struggle in South Africa and she asserts that this struggle modified both cultures resulting in transculturation and hybridity which includes besides transculturation, trans-socialization, and miscegenation too. She also argues that transculturation and hybridity are unavoidable in post-apartheid South Africa as she states in an interview published in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* collected by, Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour:

[. . .] if white people are to survive in the true sense, [. . .] then they must rethink all their values. It is on this rethinking of values that white-consciousness is founded [. . .] that there is a black cultural heritage which we, as whites, have been deprived of [. . .] Whites are beginning to think this way now. There are many who want to strike down roots into a new culture, a third culture. Whether that'll come off, whether politics will sabotage it or not [. . .].
(Seymour 212-214)

In the cultural in-between space created in her narrative, Gordimer represents the first type of traveller (Black/native) in the characters of July and the other men who cross the space between the metropolis and the rural homelands for work and return with goods and lots of stories, stories of the migrant; stories about race and class hierarchy created by Apartheid as expressed by July about the marvels of the city:

A room to sleep in, another room to eat in, another room to sit in, a room with books (she had a Bible), I don't know how many times you told me, a room with how many books ... Hundreds I think. And hot water that is made like the lights we see in the street at Vosloosdorp. All these things I've never seen, my children have never seen—the room for bathing—and even you, there in the yard you had a room for yourself for bathing, and you didn't even wash your clothes in there, there was a machine in some other room for that [...]. (Gordimer, July's People 22)

Another important character and figure of native travellers is Gumba-Gumba man, a figure belonging to the contact zone, he goes to the metropolis and returns to the village; in other words, he crosses the space between Black and White worlds bringing novelties to entertain his people. His red box represents a cultural in-betweenness as it brings the township music into the village culture: “Baby, baby come duze – duze – duze” (Gordimer, July's People 188)

Further, another figure of the Black traveller is presented by Gordimer to criticise the abusive practices which only Black miners faced as they were sent to the deepest channels; the “Boss Boy”, the in-between figure of a migrant worker which exposes Apartheid’s Labour system obliging Blacks to live in continuous displacement through the evidence of his objects left in the hut (Gordimer, *July’s People* 36).

The Boss Boy, Gumba-Gumba man, July and the other Black men live between places and jobs because of the temporary nature of their contracts. Gordimer uses these figures to draw attention to the policy of native employment, and the Apartheid government’s disregard of rural areas and homelands; she exposes Apartheid’s ensuring of the transient labour force which may present solidarity among tribes; it also justifies the Whites’ monopoly of power and economy. Pass Laws passed by Apartheid government levy taxes on homeland inhabitants, without providing employment within the homelands, this forces the men out into the mines and urban centres. The Pass Laws oblige Black men to abandon their families, which consequently leads to a breakdown in family life. The women are left alone with the burden of caring for the old and their children, and taking care of their miserable cattle and the agriculture hardly enough for their survival. The physical separation of husbands and wives also leads to infidelity shown in July’s relationship with Ellen as we read in the novel:

—More than fifteen years. Yes ... The first time was in 1965. But I didn’t work for them, then. I worked in that hotel, washing up in the kitchen. I had no papers, that time. All of us in the kitchen had no papers, the owner let us sleep in the store-room, he locked us in so nobody could steal and take food out. [...] —he had brought home from that job the money to pay her father (he had already paid the cattle). She had had her first child by then, and she became his wife. That was what happened to her, her story; he came home every two years and each time, after he had gone, she gave birth to another child. (Gordimer, *July’s People* 163)

While the Black ‘travellers’ moved from the periphery to the centre (Johannesburg) portraying the migration of powerless subalterns¹ in search of employment, the Smales²/White travellers flee the Black revolution to the periphery through which they are exposed to the horrors of the interior. Through this journey, Gordimer criticises Apartheid policies, colonialism, capitalism, liberalism and White middle-class values and

¹ The term “subaltern” holds different definitions from different intellectuals and postcolonial critics. Its meaning “of inferior rank,” was first used by Antonio Gramsci in reference to groups in society controlled by the dominant ruling classes. For him, the subaltern is anyone who is “subordinated in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (*The Southern Question* xiv). The term then is expanded by the Subaltern Studies historians who employed subalternity as a general concept covering all oppressed groups: working class, women, peasantry, tribal communities etc., and used it as a name for a general attribute of subordination.

² Bam and Maureen Smales are ‘enlightened’ White liberals.

attitudes (Clingman). The Smales thus recognise the inadequacy of their liberal beliefs in private connection with Blacks despite of their fifteen years with them.

She also invokes their hypocrisy when the Smales insist that July should not call Bam ‘master’, however, they give him a room smaller than their own garage and give him their old things. Maureen recognises her arrogance when she says to July: “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 don’t know, I didn’t know, and I should have known” (Gordimer, *July's People* 87-88).

Another image of civilised hypocrisy is exposed in the Smales’ fear of disease and unhygienic conditions; a fear disguised by Maureen with a civilised etiquette “we’ll cook for ourselves. We must make our own fire.” (Gordimer, *July's People* 12), she also prefers to maintain control over her family’s nutritional habits. Again July, the cultural in-between figure, sustains the Smales to keep their civilized rituals in the heart of native barbarism in the homelands as he provides a zinc bath big enough for their children to sit in and wash. He also prepares a pawpaw (Gordimer, *July's People* 11).

The Smales, the new white travellers are presented as being aware of the inequalities and imbalances of Apartheid, however, they are really involved within it by their race and class offered privileges and their quiet support of capitalism since they invest in gold and diamond industries which depend merely on Black labour exploitation (Erritouni).

In fact, the journey of the Smales ‘White travellers’ into the homeland let them approach more approximately the horrors of the interior imposed by Apartheid Laws (The Native Lands Act, Group Areas Act, Pass Laws, Job Reservation and Homelands policy). Thus Maureen is a witness on utter poverty, agricultural ruin because of overuse of land, the absence of food, water, electricity and sanitation, besides a destruction of family life because of migrant Labour system. The Smales finally recognise the evils of those laws but they could never radically oppose Apartheid for their economic interest (Erritouni), (Powell).

Another basic element of the colonial travel narrative and a figure of the contact zone is the chief, typical to the meeting scene between the colonizer and the natives. Yet, he is not portrayed as usual; a noble barbarian wearing feathers, ornaments and animal skin; Gordimer presents him as “irascible, ill-nourished old man, king of migrant workers, of a wilderness of neglect.” (Gordimer, *July's People* 143). She considers him a stooge of the Apartheid regime; she hints at this in his hostile attitude to Black revolutionaries.

Gordimer also employs animal imagery typical to colonial travel narratives. She compared the African youth who assists Bam in the hunt to a “buck”, and a “predator” (Gordimer, *July's People* 93), July is called a

“frog prince” (11), the Black women are seen as “marsh-birds” (111), Maureen’s hair is compared to “the tail of a dirty sheep” (27), and the Smales’ children to “frogs” (169). Actually, Gordimer tends to expose her readers to both Whites stereotypes of Blacks and an Africanizing of the Smales (Williamson 87).

In the contact zone, usually a certain cultural mutation occurs between colonizers and natives. In the development of the story, the Smales’ children adopt gestures, customs and habits and gradually become culturally Black “Bam was giving the children food. He dug off lumps of mealie-meal he had cooked and they took it with their fingers. They were chattering and said nothing to her when she appeared”. And the parents’ manners changed too “[...] he ate with the children, using the tin spoon to which tatters of pap clung. She ate nothing and went into the dark hut, finding the water-bottle by feel. In there she drank the whole bottle in a series of sucking gulps broken by long pauses, [...].” (Gordimer, *July's People* 188).

On the other hand July distances himself from Black revolutionaries and wants Whites power restored. He becomes culturally more White; he refers to the Black rebels as “them” whereas Martha and Mhani refer to them as “our people”, he also saves the Smales. July, the cultural figure of the in-between urban Black who can speak a hybrid English, is considered by the writer as a figure focusing culture as the primary social determinant in South African society and power balance rather than race which is a central objective to Apartheid.

The new Black South Africa, anticipated by the end of the novel, may not be totally harmonious since Gordimer guessed the division of Black solidarity by contrasting political and social interests. In the character of July, Gordimer portrays the urban Black who cannot interact with his own people (Martha and Mhani), who not only occupies the in-between townships (spaces between technologically regressive [Black] homelands and the technologically progressed [White] cities but he also represents a hybrid culture which is neither totally White nor Black, yet influenced by both, a third culture as she asserted in the citation above. For Gordimer, this hybridity is an unavoidable result of colonialism and capitalism which contradicts Apartheid’s rigid separation of races and cultures.

Furthermore, Gordimer accuses the Whites for being an obstacle to The Black’s self-esteem and recognition. One of the images exploring this fact is the important and crucial image of the confrontation over the possession of the keys of the yellow bakkie. For July, if Maureen accepts his possession of the keys, she values his humanity and she recognizes his worth and self-esteem as a person which signifies her trust in his capability and judgment. Thus he tells her angrily:

—You don’t like I must keep the keys. Isn’t it. I can see all the time, you don’t like that.— She began to shake her head, arms crossed under her breasts, almost laughing; lying, protesting for

time to explain— —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 ... it's me I've got the key for all your things, isn't it— (Gordimer, *July's People* 84)

His claim is based on the point that there is no good reason for Maureen to distrust him since he has kept the keys many times over the years as servant to the Smales. Evidently Maureen's demand challenges his sense of equality and dignity as a person which he has built up during his stay with the Smales. In so doing, Maureen denies July's quest for recognition and equality to the Smales. Maureen is faced with her liberal hypocrisy again as she has never known July as anything but a paid porter of her things. Gordimer asserts that Whites need to find new perceptions to come to understand Blacks; they must question their principles and values. In (*Gordimer, Living in the Interregnum*), she focuses on the significance of whites to believe in their ability to find new insights to understand and judge the Blacks and the truth about them; she accuses them of "cultural chauvinism" associated with Englishness in South Africa (Steyn) cited in (West 78).

Williamson also invokes the linguistic transculturation to confirm that differing cultural and political interests have displaced the racial binary of Apartheid South Africa in both opposing directions (89); Martha talks to Maureen in a pidgin of Afrikaans and English and the Smales use a few indigenous words like "kgotla" and "nhwanyana" which passed into common white language, and the evidence of Maureen's recognition and regret of her linguistic and cultural distance from Blacks is a further detail to retain:

"If we could talk [...] Whites in the pass offices and labour bureaux who used to have to deal with blacks all the time across the counter—speaking an African language was simply a qualification, so far as they were concerned, that's all. Something you had to have to get the job [...] Pragmatism not 'significance': that's what I'm talking about. Fanagalo would have made more sense than ballet." (Gordimer, *July's People* 54).

Furthermore, July is the translator between the Smales and his people; Maureen occasionally speaks July's English as she interprets between July and Bam. Gordimer presents the contact zone instigating linguistic transculturation besides transferring the culture of both societies.

Although *July's People* is considered by critics as a literary prophecy since it is set in a future South Africa, yet the historical consciousness of its author is also important. Nadine Gordimer could save literally the memory of her people by recording not only historical events but specific details of a multicultural country. In *July's People*, different elements of colonial travel narrative: colonial traveller, the chief, animal imagery, anti-

slavery critique, social descriptions...etc.¹ are refigured through the plot of an imaginary Black revolt in Johannesburg and Whites flight to the rural homelands for security to offer to readers and critics a nuanced view of South African realities that couldn't be saved by historians for memory. She used her artistic capacity to portray meticulously a hybrid identity and a third culture result of cultural exchanges between two totally different socio-cultural communities in South Africa. A transformation imposed by the racial segregationist system Apartheid, capitalism, liberalism and colonialism.

Further, by creating this ambiguous view about the racial identity of the 'other'² in this work and others, Gordimer succeeds to constantly challenge the clear categorisations, separations, and binaries imposed by Apartheid in South Africa.

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¹ To read more about other elements in this work like: hunting tales, myths, military memory, common history, ethnography and racial love, the reader can refer to the work of Williamson, Nivedita Bagchi. *Reinscribing Genres and Representing South African Realities in Nadine Gordimer's Later Novels (1979-1994)*.

² The 'other' concept in literature can have different meanings. Basically it is an individual who is perceived by a group as not belonging to it; as they have been culturally constructed differently. The group sees itself as the 'standard' and perceives those who do not meet its norms and as lacking essential characteristics thus lesser or inferior beings and are treated accordingly. It may be someone who is of a different race, gender, culture, religion, social class, sexual orientation or nationality.

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