



## NADINE GORDIMER'S JULY'S PEOPLE: A STORY OF REACTION

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Received: 02/01/2018

Edited: 15/01/2018

Accepted: 24/01/2018

**Abstract:** *Nadine Gordimer took on the cause of the oppressed non-whites of her country and made them the focus of the world she created in her books. She condemned the complacent and narrow minded hypocrisy of whites who accepted - in fact supported - the ever increasing disenfranchisement of Africans as the system of apartheid strangled her homeland. July's People is a story of the reactions, adaptations, and survival of Bamford and Maureen Smales to the life they have found in a black village after being thrown from their middle-class white neighborhood. Gordimer's July's people is pessimistic in that they portray South Africa realistically but as our text contends Gordimer influenced the world's perception of South Africa more fully and effectively than any other writer of fiction.*

**Key words:** *South Africa, Cultural Clash, Reaction, Survival.*

Nadine Gordimer took on the cause of the oppressed non-whites of her country and made them the focus of the world she created in her books. She condemned the complacent and narrow minded hypocrisy of whites who accepted - in fact supported - the ever increasing disenfranchisement of Africans as the system of apartheid strangled her homeland.

*July's People* is a story of the reactions, adaptations, and survival of Bamford and Maureen Smales to the life they have found in a black village after being thrown from their middle-class white neighborhood. Bam's adjustment to their new life in the village was much better than Maureen's because he handled the situation rationally by attempting to become a part of the community without letting his emotions get the best of him. Maureen on the other hand, could not adjust to the situation and went almost completely insane because she could not accept a life without racial and gender structures. This alteration in her lifestyle was completely unbearable and she couldn't survive without the power, control, and luxuries she once had. As a result of the radically different reactions and adaptations of Bam and Maureen to the life in July's village, their relationship with one another was completely disintegrated.

It is a brilliant example for a post-apartheid interregnum contrasted with another example that reflects upon the "mood of white liberal failure". (Smith 141) Gordimer explores two conflicting scenes in which roles are switched: the black servant, July, became a master and the master became a servant. Maureen, the protagonist, depicts the negative image of the white liberals who appear dogmatic, not even willing to face reality. It is a very common characteristic of her South African novels which celebrate a "dead end" and an "impasse" (Smith 140).

The concluding scene has many facts that are intended to reflect upon the future of South Africa. Here, Maureen looks „defeated, though she was more “enabled” at the beginning (Pordzik 183), after she fails to communicate with July by trying to convince him that „he and she are „equal and that she has never been superior to him. Later on, she runs and chases a helicopter. In fact, most critics are impressed by the final scene, so most of their criticisms mainly focus on it. Maureen reverses roles with Bam in the hope of gaining extra power but she seems unable to manage any of the roles assigned to her as mother, as a wife, and as white liberal. In general, she fails to live up to the expectation of her husband; both of them start to lose the sense of one

another, looking at one another as a „him“ and a „her,“ “[her family] were chattering and said nothing to her when she appeared, as if they thought she had been there all the time” (JP154). She also fails to deal in a motherly manner with her children, especially when Bam starts to take care of everything inside the house such as feeding the children and doing the household. These acts in effect make her unable to maintain her identity. Maureen has not become the suitable representative for any post-apartheid future in South Africa because she simply fails to prove herself being physically and socially powerful for “she [is] not in any possession of any part of her life” and also “she had regained no establishment point of a continuing present from which to recognize her own consequence” (JP 139). She finds herself as a helpless.

They [the children] looked to their mother but her expression was closed to them. Even her body – so familiar in the Jeans as worn as the covering of a shabby stuffed toy, the T-Shirt stretched over the flat small breasts that were soft to lie against. (JP 145)

The big mistake of course is to have labeled the novel racist. What better way to apologize for this all too common slur than to make it a prescribed book? Proscription, of course, would probably have better ensured that it was read.

Perhaps a major overhaul of the classics would save the day. Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* has been described as "inappropriate for the new South Africa. It highlights religious and cultural intolerance and stereotyping, in conflict with the Constitution and with educational principles.

Why not then correct its failure to provide a useful overall historical interpretation of rural colonial life by making its central character, Lyndall, no longer a late Victorian new woman through which Schreiner addressed her society's concerns but a late 20th century Zimbabwean racist settler type

whose property has been invaded by heroic war veterans?

Dickens's *Great Expectations* has been dismissed as containing nothing of recognizable relevance to the South African situation. Pip is now Pipji an Indian orphan from Durban, who abandons his old struggle chums and travels to Cape Town to join the fashionable elite. (Fear not. There is an upbeat, correct ending. After political re-education, he is accepted back into the fold.)

George Orwell's 1984 poses a bit of a problem. Initially it was thought that concerns that the novel would encourage a rebellious attitude to authority especially the new SA state could be addressed by merely renaming it 1994, but it is now suggested that this would rather increase its element of subversive rebellion.

No such problems, though with M Purkey's *Sophiatown* of which the evaluators have said : The books has nothing to do with democratic values and would definitely evoke racism.

While they have expressed a fear that the book's racial conflict topic would prove to be destructive in a classroom situation they nevertheless suggest that these issues are perhaps better dealt with in a history class rather than an English one.

This is interesting because here we really can learn a lesson from history. Not only her novels and stories Gordimer did not refuse to accommodate herself to the system despite her status as a member of the dominant white minority but she also used her talents and recognition as an author to speak forcefully against the system that institutionalized segregation to a greater degree. She didn't just think about it, she did something.

#### Summary:

Gordimer's *July's people* is pessimistic in that they portray South Africa realistically but as our text contends Gordimer influenced the world's perception of South Africa more fully and effectively than any other writer of fiction.

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