

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

The Revolution in Nadine Gordimer's July's People

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Abstract:

Nadine Gordimer's themes make it clear to us that South Africa is still under the grip of a 'virus' socially and politically. The themes are dealt against the background of the apartheid system. Gordimer novels show a clear pattern of political argument. This is an article on the changing power of relationship between the whites and blacks as the structural underpinning's of white rule are removed, leaving the former white employers very much at the behest of their servant July, who now has almost the power of life and death over the fugitive Smales. Being the whites living among the blacks as refugees, depending upon July without any relationship, trying to hide their identity crisis in cohabitation among the opposites. This article portrays us how a white woman who is well habituated to the apartheid world cannot bear and get accustomed to the cultural differences and desperately yearns for a white society.

Nadine Gordimer is a towering figure of world literature. Nadine Gordimer was born on November 20, 1923 into a well – off family in springs, Transvaal in South Africa. Nadine Gordimer is the winner of the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature. Her works, spanning more than five decades, relentlessly expose the traumas and tensions of apartheid in South Africa.

The condition of white South Africans in a new political order of an imaginary future becomes the theme of Gordimer's novel, July's People (1981). It is an apocalyptic story of a terrifying interregnum, in which a white couple, Bam and Maureen Smales, with their children flee a revolution which deprives them of their power and status a take refuge in the village of their black servant, whom they call July. The epigraph, from Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks – "The old is dying and the new cannot be born in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms" – points to the traumatic anxiety, uncertainty, helplessness and loss of identity that the central character's experience.

The Smales are caught between the opposite polarities of a life governed by 'white' codes and another kind of existence where these codes have little meaning. Their liberalism has been a pretense, more a matter of protecting their own selves than a genuine reaching out and is doomed to failure. "They joined political parties and 'contact groups in willingness to slough privilege it was supposed to be their white dog nature to guard with Mirages and tanks; they were not believed. They had thought of leaving.... They had stayed; and told each other and everyone else that this and nowhere else was home, while knowing, as time left went by, the reason had become they couldn't get their money out.

Their complacence and arrogance is thinly disguised as benevolent generosity. To Maureen, July is just 'the boy' for the house, "decently paid, clothed by them in two sets of uniform, given Wednesdays and alternate Sundays free, allowed to have his friends visit him," and yet she knows that she indulged him only because she had been afraid to lose him and the comforts he provided. "He must have known, when she handed some new object on to him, it was because it was shoddy or ugly to her, and if it were some old object, it was because she no longer valued it". (67) His dignity as a man is of no importance to her.

It is therefore a reversal of roles that July now is the one in whose hands their lives are held. Their total dependency on him now replicates his earlier subservience to them, in which he had to ask for everything. "An aspirin. Can I use the telephone? Nothing in that house was his". (155) Now Maureen realizes "She was already not what she was. No fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know... They had nothing". (29)

As refugees in July's village, they are forced back into an existence which nullifies the importance of personal achievement and material possessions. Stripped of all the trappings of power they experience a chilling loss of sense of self. "Us and them. Who is us, now and who them?" (117).

The discover hitherto unknown aspects of themselves – Bam, that he is a killer, Maureen, that she has indulged in sadism and theft. As the novel ends, Maureen is seen running towards the helicopter that circles overhead, “like a solitary animal... the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility,” (160) a final exposure of the emptiness and bankruptcy of the values epitomized by the Smales.

References

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