

Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*: A Parodic Postmodern Revisitation of History

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Abstract

The parody figures noteworthy in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. It has been used as a postmodern form to deconstruct what it challenges. It provides both historical and racial investigation of a crucial period in the history of South Africa. Moreover, it rethinks and reevaluate the power relationship. It never rejects one structure of power in favor of the other. As such, it sometime takes up racism and problematizes it by a reactionary denial and exclusion or provides a paradoxical attitude towards the forms which it contests. This paper seeks to examine Gordimer's novel from a postmodern deconstructive perspective by drawing on major theorists of the parody like Jacques Derrida and Linda Hutcheon, in an attempt to bring to the light the reflexive function of parody and show how it challenges the notion of Apartheid in *July's People*. The analysis of this paper shows that in this novel, there is an approach of recognition and rejection, of accepting and undermining to challenge the idea of subjectivity by an implication of the parody as a postmodern form. This usage of parody reflects a redefinition of parody as a critical vehicle that allows ironic conveying of difference at the very essence of similarity.

Keywords: Nadine Gordimer, *July's People*, parody, deconstruction, Hutcheon

1. Introduction

Postmodernism has always been related to the notions such as "decentering", "interruption", and "discontinuity." It is mostly because of the loss of center around which subjects generally construct their thoughts. It has a paradoxical relationship with history and has been benefited from the internalization and investigation of the nature of limits in any significant areas such as literature, architecture, history, music and so on. It deals with the uncertainty, offer a critique of ideas regarding order and unity in language and subjectivity. It criticizes in two distinct ways: in repudiating convictions and in problematizing autonomy. Both of these areas abrogate reality.

All of these concept are present as major themes of Gordimer's novel. In *July's people*, she portrays the tale of Smales – a white family who take refuge in July's village when the country is in liberation war. July, once their servant now turns to be a person who saves them from harm. Gardimer's novel is not characterized by a reactionary denial or exclusion of the whites, but by its paradoxical attitude towards this liberation movement urges the readers to think over any revolutionary act. This characteristic of her novel along with its open ending structure makes inevitable the usage of parody as a technique for questioning of any subversion. To discuss what is termed 'deconstructive reading' and 'postmodern technique of parody', this study begins by defining the concept of parody.

1.1 The Parody

Known as a postmodern form, parody both assimilate and challenges what it satirizes. Linda Hutcheon believes that it "The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (A Poetics of Postmodernism, p. 26).

1.2 Derrida and the Parody

Among the influential theories of postmodernism is deconstruction, promoted by Jacques Derrida. Derrida's sense of belonging to a marginal culture had fundamental influence on the usage of deconstruction for a re-reading of history. His thought problematizes all established ideas in any discipline. From his view point, it is really a tough job to draw a clear-cut border between reality and representation. In a simple term, deconstruction attempts to reassess the limits of the principle of reason which has shaped the fabricated history available to the new generation mostly in the countries experienced issues such as patriarchy and Apartheid. As such Robert Phiddian remarks,

deconstruction does not aspire in a straightforward way to be a discourse of truth. It is interested in questions of truth, but it does not pursue them in the direct, serious, and analytic fashion of speech-act philosophers like John R. Searle or of traditional hermeneutics. (p. 673)

In Derridian reading, interest always has been paid to the distortion of truth rather than truth as a constitutionalized fact. "He looks at the effect of truth in language with the eye of neither an idealist nor an empiric, but a parodist" (Phiddian,

p. 673). The usage of parody for questioning truth is an important part of deconstruction. It has helped deconstructors to assume all histories are fragmented and decentered. In the other word, they always carry on their own negation. Parody also plays the same role like deconstruction in contesting texts.

Phiddian in his influential essay goes on to discuss that “parody is a form of deconstruction” (p. 681). From a postmodern deconstructive view point, Gordimer’s obsession with derivativeness and transformations can be assumed as parodic. Derrida also substantiate the point.

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (Of Grammatology, p. 24)

When a writer such as Gordimer is going to borrow some major ideas from the old structure to redefine a relationship, she in the real sense is using parody for the purpose of deconstruction.

1.3 Hutcheon and the Parody

Among the major contemporary theorist, Linda Hutcheon (1988) has discussed more about the usage of parody in a postmodern sense. She avers,

It is precisely brings about –that seemingly introverted formalism-that paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself, to a discursive world of socially defined meaning systems (past and present)-in other words, to the political and the historical. (Modelling the Postmodern, p. 22)

She substantiate her point by some references and readings of theorists like Charles Jenks (1969) and Paolo Portoghesi (1983) those who are among the major theorists of postmodernism. Linda believes that references to historical and political issues in the postmodern texts are parodic. They are parodic in using and abusing, constructing and deconstructing historical events in parodic ways. She emphasis that

In implicitly contesting in this way such concepts as aesthetic originality and textual closure, postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe. (p. 23)

2. Review of Literature

July's People explores the nature of an upheaval both in personal and social level. It depicts the destiny of Smales family who escape to a rural area to refuge to their own servant’s village on the occurrence of revolution to save their lives. They flee from a violence but on the way they lose their economic, social status and identities as well.

The novel’s title underscores the indefinite and satiric nature of relationship in the book. July is the servant of the Smales but the revolution makes them “July’s People” from the view point of people in July’s village. Preserving white family’s lives makes the novel a parody of the liberation war. The interesting point is that July once servant becomes the “savior” of his former “master.” They became dependent to him. This dependence enters them into a new bewildering situation. This state of great disturbance is the world of the black people. The reality which they are confronted with is a parody of their past.

July's People has received lots of attention from critics. Among them a substantial study is *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* by Stephen Clingman (1992). He has assigned a chapter to his reading of *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People*. The attention has been paid to the depiction of revolution. The role of whites in the future of the country is a matter of importance. For instance,

Whether there can be a role for whites in the context of Soweto and after, and what the practical implications of such a role might be. The two novels are in some ways very different; Rosa Burger, in *Burger's Daughter*, comes from an official and conspicuous political tradition; Maureen Smales, in *July's People*, is amongst the most ordinary of Gordimer's characters, politically considered. But the underlying themes of the two novels unite them, at the same time suggesting new developments in Nadine Gordimer's consciousness of history. (Pp. 171-72)

Stephen looks into the novel in search of elements which show Gordimer was involved in the campaign against censorship. He reads from the novel that Gordimer is of the opinion that censorship is “a weapon of thought control.” (p. 194). Karen R. Johnson (1995) the other critic takes a look at the ideas behind choosing titles for Gordimer’s novels. In “What the Name will make Happen”: Strategies of Naming in Nadine Gordimer’s Novels, she investigates cultural

aspects in some novels and believes that Gordimer in her fiction directly or indirectly addresses Apartheid. In her view point

it is on the level of rhetoric rather than of plot and character that Gordimer offers her most radical challenge to the apartheid system, for, in such strategies as those that inform her use of names and naming, she attacks the core of that system—the belief that any name or label can express the essence of an individual or group, or, more basically, that any individual or group has such an immutable essence. (p. 117)

Karen thinks that there can be found a relationship between social construction of each title and ambivalent attitudes towards such construction. Gordimer in choosing the title for her last five novels including *July's People* is more concerned with the people instead of individual. From the other view point, Gordimer expresses her political vision through choosing names. As such Karen remarks, “In Gordimer's fiction, the discovery of the African name by a white person exposes a denied gap in understanding and compels a recognition of the suppression of the black voice as a whole” (p. 125).

One other significant study on *July's People* is done by Ali Erritouni (2006). Ali in ‘Apartheid Inequality and Postapartheid Utopia in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*’ believes that,

Gordimer does not imagine a full-fledged postapartheid South Africa; rather, she merely adumbrates possibilities for a more equal co-existence between blacks and whites. If apartheid, with its policies of racial segregation, tipped the economic balance in favor of whites, Gordimer envisions a postapartheid future where whites would remedy the economic disparities between them and their fellow black South Africans. (p. 68)

He concludes that Gordimer's examination of post-Apartheid condition assigns to the blacks the idea of any understanding of compromise and justification of inequalities. In respect of the available research on the *July's People*, a postmodern parodic reading of the novel remains undiscovered.

3. Discussion

Gordimer's novel as a postmodern work rethinks and reworks its earlier predecessors of itself that propagate a blind revolution or liberation movement. It is an appropriate vehicle of undermining influential racist structures and thus it is right for a deconstructive purposes.

July's People is partly historical reconstruction and partly some up to date opinions. It is exactly at the point where these two opinion meet parody arises and self-consciously undermines what it inhabits. The Apartheid beliefs in upper-class values as well as the morals of the whites and the unshakable belief in considering blacks and colored people as minions, which were supported by different strange legislations, are not consonant with a large part of the body of post-Apartheid values and thought. Therefore, *July's People* as the representatives of the two main beliefs, white and black, which are presented as parodic figures and illustrate the disjunction between the Apartheid and the post-Apartheid mind. Instead of depicting a hero who carries the truth of post-Apartheid values to the racist country of South Africa there is July, a pitiful creature and anti-hero. Likewise, there is the racist anti-heroine Maureen, who believes in reconstruction of Apartheid values. Although both of them belong to the same society neither of them are committed to the societies values and to what society expects of them. They are outsiders and alienated subjects.

If we look at July, for example, we will distinguish that he is not able to make a right understanding of his surroundings. The novel's title, brings to the light the unstable personality of July and the relationship between him and his country man. It shows the nature of revolution both on political and a personal level. The Smales family escape from one revolt and entangled in the other. The fact that July is the servant of the Smales makes the family, to July's village residents, “July's People.” In the other word, they are trying to reconstruct or preserve their lives and status but in between lose their identity. Because, they are considered as the Other in the eyes of July's people. In this process, they become dependent on July. As a matter of fact, the only thing that has been changed is the place of White and Black. It parodies the racial discrimination in pre-Apartheid period.

Linda Hutcheon regards parody as

a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions. (p. 11)

In addition to, it is a good vehicle for diminishing racist structures and thus is very suitable in the hand of Gordimer for problematizing liberation movement. *July's People* depicts a country of contrasts. It gives some lessons in how cultures can sometimes blend and in the other times collide. In the sense that, there is a huge gap between the white minority and the black majority in almost all matters of importance such as education, economic, and culture. In the novel these differences are shown in parodic ways both in plot and character. Much of the parody in the novel's plot structure is a result of the novel's intertextuality and relevant with historical facts.

The novel is partly historical reconstruction. It is concerned with liberation movements from apartheid. Apartheid was the official structure of the South Africa. It was nothing more than an excuse for domination by the white minority of blacks and colored. This domination was consisted of a set of legal inequalities. In the exact sense of the word, Ann Tyler (1981) substantiates the point.

Gordimer's novel is an intense look at a network of power relations-black to white, servant to master, male to female, child to parent-and the enormous changes wrought in all allegiances once power shifts utterly, for all the extremities of the situation, It chronicles and the suspense-drama of its plot, it is a very subtle book-spare, careful, and instructive (p. 45).

Therefore, July and Maureen as the representatives of the two main Apartheid race constructions, black and white, are presented as parodic figures and illustrate the disjunction between the pre and post-Apartheid mind. Take into consideration July, for example, it is obvious he never fits pre-apartheid society. In Smales family he is only a servant. He has to adapt himself to lots of different things not only to white culture but also to the English language. But in new role he is no more a servant but a savior. It accords with Phiddian's opinion,

Parodies stand for the things they displace, but they do not merely repeat them, as translations aspire to do, or extend them like imitations. They displace, distort, differ, and defer. Derrida argues that *differance* is both a spacing and a temporization. (p. 686)

In the novel parodies distance us from identification with the power structure before and after Apartheid. Dispossession is a major parody in the novel. As Smales moves to July's village, the parody of dispossession begins. This dispossession happens at the verge of revolution. It highlights the conflict – internal as well as external. As a matter of fact, it is considered a crucial point in the novel from a deconstructive view point as well. Gordimer criticizes disposition of blacks by whites. This change of role in the novel, “borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure” (Of Grammatology, p. 24) is expressed in the form of parody. Gordimer's implied references to historical subversion from the Apartheid to a post-Apartheid condition is precisely what parody does. Parodizing post-Apartheid condition in this novel provides,

a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe. (Poetics of Postmodernism, p. 23)

Among the major characters, July is the most dispossessed one. As is his innocence his language has to fight against both grammatical structure. He has to deal with lack of words either English or his own local language to describe his state of being and situation as a victim of racism. Smales their communication with July never bother about feelings, emotions and sensations because, “It was based on orders and responses, not the exchange of ideas and feelings” (p. 67). This act paradises the fact that their language proved functional and kept them at a distance from one another. As such, the language is both an impediment to understanding and a means for July to maintain his distance from Smales.

It is in this sense that the novel becomes prophetic, because Gordimer brilliantly portrays blacks' desire for freedom. In all different types of relationship: racial, gender and class, blacks are subjugated and suffer from injustice. The impacts of racial thought are different between individuals and groups. A binary-opposition can be found in all relations: black and white, male and female, parent and child, husband and wife. In all these relationships Gordimer investigates the parodic nature of revolution to tell the change is inevitable but “nothing new has been born” necessarily. There is a consistent emphasis on the relationship between material possession and power. The Smales are accustomed to their luxury lives. They have been always living in a secure sense of economy and ownership. It shows itself in their struggle to preserve their former state of being secure. Their children maintain this sense of ownership, but they soon adapt themselves their new condition. They learn how to live in village and find some ways to define themselves within the new structure. But, this is not a simple process for elders. Maureen and Barn never fully adjust to their new condition because their self-definition is based on their status as possessors. In current situation, they are dispossessed politically, culturally, and most importantly economically. They rely more on the remaining belongings to preserve whatever left out of their identity. However, this way of writing is aimed for social awareness. This makes *July's People* a parodic revisitation. As such Hutcheon remarks,

All architects know that, by their art's very nature as the shaper of public space, the act of designing a building is an unavoidably social act. Parodic references to the history of architecture textually reinstate a dialogue with the past and-perhaps inescapably-with the social and ideological context in which architecture is (and has been) both produced and lived. In using parody in this way, postmodernist forms want to work toward a public discourse that would overtly eschew modernist aestheticism and hermeticism and its attendant political self-marginalization. (Poetics of Postmodernism, p.23)

The novel also gives a detailed study of the sense of ownership in a parodic way. Material things cause several disagreement between them. In one occasion, they fear July's appropriation of the Bakkie. They feel because July now controls their means of escape and his act of possessing vehicle inverts their relationship with him. In Hutcheon's term,

The past as referent is not bracketed or effaced, as Jameson would like to believe: it is incorporated and modified, given new and different life and meaning... even the most self-conscious and parodic of contemporary works do not try to escape, but indeed foreground, the historical, social, ideological contexts in which they have existed and continue to exist. (Poetics of Postmodernism, pp.24-25)

In the novel parody has been used as connection between past and present. It is in this way that parodic postmodern texts can act as a social re-reading of a specific period in history. Bakkie, Keys and the Gun are used as parody. Because they represent the power equation. Hence a struggle for possessing them occur between July and Maureen throughout the novel.

He wanted to call the children into the hut but did not know how to explain the necessity he felt, or if she shared it. If she said 'Why?', what would he say? He had a gun; he had brought his twelve-bore shot-gun as she had remembered toilet paper. It was hidden thrust up into the thatch, there above their heads as they stood in this hut where there was no room to hide anything from one another. What place was there for a white man's gun among these people who had taken them in without asking why they should expect to be sheltered, fed, hidden? (p. 41)

The shift in power depicted brilliantly. It happens to the extreme. There is a moment in the novel when July's mother even questions the presence of them. "White people must have their own people somewhere. Aren't they living everywhere, my son. Don't they go anywhere they want to go? They've got money" (p. 19). The act of questioning indicates power. Therefore it is very difficult to protect individual fates and the terrible choices forced upon people.

The reversal of a pre-established role is a central issue in Gordimer's revisitation of history. July the last servant of Smales family now is going to act as their protector. For this reversal of roles, Gordimer revisits both the revolutionary moment and the internal debates of the characters at the most significant moments. In this process, characters are continually forced to negotiate new ways of relationship in parodic ways. The writer makes use of the awkward socializing between the whites and blacks that is the result of a new power structure. The language is a major problem between them and is used as a parody to illustrate the discomfort of that negotiation. This issue is manifested in the behavior of Maureen. She consider herself a woman of civilized values with a clear and defined place in the world. Now and all of a sudden, she understand that this secured place and the sense of dominance over the blacks is depended upon the cultural dominance over others. Hence in a new defined structure, she is subject to the perceptions and definitions of others. Memory plays a central role in linking the past and the present in the novel. Gordimer as a writer cannot avoid confronting her characters with different layers of history. It seems that Maureen's behavior wants to indicate that even in the new revisiting of history Apartheid still plays a role and cannot be totally rejected. Because, it is part of repressed history of the natives. All part of this history must be revisited and be put into questions. Surely this is what Gordimer writes in her revisiting of the history of the past.

Maureen's self-deception of establishing a constructive relationship with July are depicted in each argument of her. When their last belonging is stolen, she tries to regain it. She asks July to help him but in a reprimanding way to salvage some sense of their last power. July reminds her that now she is a burden to him and his family. By this way, Gordimer undermines any optimistic view of future beneficial relationship. Gordimer deconstructs the history of liberation movement because, "To be seen is not necessarily to be acknowledged, where people's movement are centred about the same kind of activity in every household, every day. Everyone was everyone else's witness, and this bred its own discretion" (pp.65-66).

July's people like other parodic prose fiction attacks and ironizes power. Its parodic energy comes from the revisitation of history and it's blankly censure of Apartheid. It gives voice to a version of the story of injustice in a course of time that the other novels about Apartheid preferred to ignore. In Gordimer's hand while parody is deconstruction, "it is not pure or mere or entirely textual deconstruction" (Phiddian, p. 690).

4. Conclusion

July's People is a perfect parody of the Apartheid. It distances us from identification with any blind liberation movement and the parodic Apartheid. It actually as Phiddian utters, "setting us on a constant commuting between deconstructed and deconstructing poles/venues" (p. 686).

As it was discussed, in the novel both central characters are unable to construct a permanent understanding. Maureen realizes that the violent overthrow of Apartheid implies not only a political revolt but also "an explosion of roles" (p. 87). In this process, characters are able of self criticizing. Maureen discovers that her previous views of herself as a wife, mother, and liberal humanitarian were false since they were based on her economic and racial privileges. Her most painful realizations come during her confrontation with July, when she becomes aware of her inability to communicate with him and he forces her to recognize the true nature of their relationship. Maureen's losses culminate in her possibly suicidal rush to escape her situation at the novel's end. It justifies that there is no one Scriptural reality.

As Gordimer incorporates the history of Apartheid and its aftermath, parody is used as a suitable vehicle to the dialogue between past and present. It is in this way that parodic postmodern reading of a text can be said to undermine what it inhabits. Apartheid has been textualized in the novel, but its sounds and smells and the subjects who experienced it continue to negotiate with each other although in a deconstructive way. It is not the Apartheid alone that Gordimer seeks to deipline and destroy; it is the doubt, ambiguity, and lack of certainty about the aftermath that have been parodized.

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