Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People*: An imagined Postapartheid South Africa

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**ABSTRACT**

Through aspects of style in *July’s People*, Nadine Gordimer provides a dystopian critique of the fallacious ideas and the oppressive patterns inherent in the apartheid regime and unfolds a utopian vision of post-apartheid South Africa. Wrapped in a futuristic narrative mode, the events in the novel examine the *lying and dying* days of apartheid and its harsh realities and imagine the life of whites in the postapartheid era. The analysis demonstrates that using irony, symbols, and allegory, the author rebukes power differentials, and primitive conditions born from racial hierarchy but also unveils the hypocrisy of white liberals, foregrounded in the representation of the black liberation movement. In doing so, the discussion elaborates on power dynamics and the forging of new identities and roles, with the Smales accommodated by their black servant, July. As a finale, the study argues that Gordimer hints at the future of whites after the demise of apartheid, and draws the contours of the anticipated society, with possible avenues for fairer interpersonal relations, a redefinition of power structures, and a redistribution of economic opportunities. This is, for the writer, an ineluctable road to the building of a new nation, symbolized by the Smales’ children’s immersion into village life, the only gleam of hope for a post-revolutionary rebirth.

**Keywords:** allegory, dystopia, Gordimer, irony, symbols, utopia.

I. **INTRODUCTION**

In her commitment to rehabilitating South African history and communities, Nadine Gordimer has fully played the role of the artist and intellectual that is at the center of the “fight for revolution (...) to be concerned with and completely at one with the people in the great battle of Africa and of suffering humanity.” (Fanon, 1963, p. 206) Her writings are a deep-bone exploration of the backlashes of the patterns of apartheid but also a way “…to imagine a variety of probable scenarios in which an array of fictional selves could act out possibilities” (Bazin, 2000, p. 29).

Of all her texts, *July’s People* (1981), released in the heyday of the systemic racial separation, is the one that imagines the most life in the postapartheid period. The events of the story are, on the one hand, a dystopian critique of how racial discrimination plagues social life and, on the other hand, they provide ample anticipations of future possibilities. Yet, amid the chaotic aspect of events, and the symbolic and much-discussed open-ended closure, the narrative unfolds signs predicting the outcome of the revolution and the transformations bred by the new political era, though Gordimer does not give well-defined contours of the society to be built on the ashes of apartheid.

*July’s People* is a Gordimer novel that arouses much critical scholarship because of the bleak present life in which the author reflects upon life beyond the dry white season of apartheid. This is the core idea of Ali Erritoumi’s analysis of the dystopian aspects and utopian projections of a more egalitarian society; he writes that the novel “draws a grim picture of South Africa in order not to only expose the social and economic consequences of apartheid, but also to open up utopian horizons beyond it” (Erritoumi, 2006, p. 69). This insightful point of the scholar suggests well the ambition of Gordimer in the novel which is to read the inclement present through the eyes of the future, imagining and signifying the upcoming existence of individuals and communities through the various symbols swarming the narrative. This is given credence by Stephen Clingman who posits that *July’s People* is a semiotic text and as such, it begs thorough decoding of “the signs and codes of the present in the light of their actual reality – and it is this reality that the projection into the future clarifies.” (1986, p. 37) Yet about this anticipatory aspect of the story – that is widely shared by commentators – André Brink, in his gender, race, and class-informed reading of Gordimer, is adamant in his position that the novel “is not a futuristic impression of a South Africa still to come, as most commentators seem to have assumed”. (1994, p. 158) On the contrary, it should be approached as “an enquiry into the apocalyptic potential of the narrative present in which the novelist wrote (...) the novel is less interested in the future per-se than in its unfolding in the present”. (1994, p. 159) Although the novel*

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is a powerful example of resistance writing and continues even now to unsettle easy assumptions about issues of power, race, gender, and identity (Nicholls, 2011, p. 2), while buttressing the ideas of Brink and Clingman, this research paper argues that Gordimer’s novel is a “utopianic metafiction” (Prodzik, 2011) or a utopian vision of postapartheid South Africa, once it gets its head above the dystopian social and political context. It discusses the future envisioned by the author, the signs of which are in the present. The question for Gordimer, as Ali Erriottoumi correctly reasons, is “not so much who will eventually rule South Africa [than] the utopian vision of a democratic South Africa, led by the black majority, and the role South African whites would play in the new dispensation” (2006, p. 68). Should we say it with Brendon Nicholls, this Gordimer novel is among its finest achievements in so much as it was conceived in a period of massive political transition, coinciding with Gordimer’s major phase, during which she abandoned consoling white liberals (Nicholls, 2011, p. 1). This transiting period, referred to as the interregnum in Gramsci’s lines, where the “new” pains to be born because of the old desperately battling with death, suggests those morbid days that are “the in-between state in the novel, when the power vacuum created by the disappearance of the apartheid regime is yet to be fulfilled by a new regime (…)” (Sistani, 2016, p. 86). Essentially, the critical attention on July’s People foregrounds the meaning of the narrative as a projection into the future, through the harsh reality of apartheid in South Africa. While developing this aspect of the story, our study casts fresh light on the symbolical bearing of Gordimer’s text, to demonstrate that the events, denouncing the abuses of racism and anticipating the horizons beyond the absolutist regime, are unfolded in a futuristic mode. In this way, its foremost aim is to discuss first Gordimer’s use of irony and symbols, as signs of a dystopian criticism of the cataclysmic decline of South African society, bred by the ideas and mechanisms of apartheid, and second, it sheds light on her utopian imagination, by focusing on the way her text “deviates” from the norms of the Western utopian novel, to produce a postcolonial utopian fiction on life after the rule of absolutism.

Meanwhile, the research paper seeks to elucidate a set of questions: how does the dystopian approach help launch a diatribe against the biased ideas and policies of apartheid? How is the use of utopia allowing to look at the future of characters through their present condition? To what extent does the Smales’ children’s immersion into village life is expressive of Gordimer’s whingeing obstinacy to participate in the building of a society where individuals are stripped of the personae of race?

As the study is entirely confined to a text, the research methodology is based on textual analysis, fed on the postulates of Ralph Prodzik’s seminal work, The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures. (2011) Prodzik’s text is a resourceful document for the analysis of July’s People because Nadine Gordimer is part of authors from English-speaking countries explored in his book, who have “taken up this decidedly western form [utopia] and worked with, and more so against than beyond, it in the various contexts of their own historical time and space.” (Hassan, 2001) Thus, the study first elaborates on the dystopian aspect of the narrative of July’s People, by elucidating the meanings of symbols and ironic structures, to explain that the text explores the dangerous effects of the political and social structures of apartheid on the future of South Africans. On a second level, it evidences that the novel is a postcolonial utopian narrative, a metafiction of life in the postapartheid era as it allows Gordimer to figure out “the future of [her country] from a distinctly postcolonial cross-cultural point of view,” (Pordzik, 2001, p. 156) suggested in her imagination of social spaces and horizons unfettered by racial compartmentalization and power controls.

II. JULY’S PEOPLE: A DYSTOPIAN CRITIQUE OF THE IDEOLOGY AND PATTERNS OF APARTHEID

July’s People is a dystopian novel through which Nadine Gordimer unveils the multifarious impacts of apartheid on individuals and the nation, but also, draws images of utopian days on the horizon of the text. Dystopian fiction generally offers a vision of the future and reflects dystopian societies in which characters battle against social decline, environmental ruin, and political oppression. Dystopian literature is a reaction to utopian literature, and it is a fictional representation of a society or community subjected to a dehumanizing system, or to a challenging situation fraught with contradictions and precariousness, like the interregnum in South Africa. “Dystopian novels that have a didactic message often explore themes like anarchism, oppression, and masspoverty” (Dhamelija, 2021). Dystopian stories can be highly imaginative (it is the case with George Orwell’s Animal Farm, 1945), or satirical (like Anthony Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange, 1962). Dystopian narratives can bring readers to think differently about current social and political climates, and in some instances can even spur action.

In its exploration of “anarchism, oppression, and mass poverty,” but also through the imagined future it offers, July’s People can be rightly categorized as dystopian fiction. The main themes underpinning such an aspect of the story are environmental destruction (the chaos of the revolution, with time and space dislocation), lack of technological control, and survival (the Smales striving to adapt to “the primitive” environment they are relocated into by July), and loss of individualism (characters’ sentiment of loss and
discontinuity). However, my argument converges, essentially, with that of Shahram Sistani who approaches *July’s People* as an “inner dystopia” (Sistani, 2016, p. 96). Indeed, the crux of the analysis is to demonstrate that the novel breaks with the dystopian tradition in which extensive reference is made to chaotic and inhuman social situations, a “dystopic terrain where everything crumbles into uncertainty” (Sistani, 2016, 93). This Gordimer novel gives thumbnail accounts of the turmoil “back there,” while offering ample images of characters’ inner turmoil and conflicts with one another, a tragic situation which is, — this is what Sistani fails to highlight — a sign of the angst of white liberals (Smales) and blacks (July) who no longer know how they should look at each other, in the cataclysmic context operative in the novel.

From the threshold of the story, the reader can feel the morbid reality of life for South Africans. They hardly know where to fit. This is triggered by the unabated oppression from the regime, and the fierce rebellion of the black oppressed community, between whom stand the white liberals, (the Smales), whose complicity and uncommitted attitude to ending apartheid is criticized by the author, not only in *July’s People* but also in *Burger’s Daughter* (1979), *A Sport of Nature* (1987), and much more in *A World of Strangers* (1958). Gordimer delineates the context of the novel in her seminal essay, *Living in the Interregnum:* “Since the black uprisings of the mid-seventies, coinciding with the independence of Mozambique and Angola, and later that of Zimbabwe, the past has rapidly begun to drop out of sight, even for those who have like [sic] go on living in it. Historical coordinates don’t fit life any longer; new ones, where they exist, have couplings not to ruler, but to be ruled” (1988, p. 220). The revolution in *July’s People* echoes those that shook the societies she evokes in the essay. The gelid system of apartheid, and its downgrading policies, ruling the South African nation is part of the “historical coordinates” to be dug out by the dauntless revolutionaries who have somehow succeeded in bringing the most fanatic upholders and the liberals to experience physical dislocation. Indeed, “while Gordimer’s apartheid-era novels were predominantly set in the near-contemporary past, they were implicitly – and increasingly, explicitly – future-oriented, being predicated on revolution. As a speculative fiction set during the predicated revolution, *July’s People* extends and reifies this teleology” (Blair, 2019, p. 108). The signs announcing the “chronic state of uprising all over the country” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 7), or the “map of social hell” (Moylan, 2000, p. 112), were already looming, as Gordimer says in an interview: “in the few years since *July’s People* was written (...) many of the things which seemed like science fiction, have begun to happen, and it’s not because I’m a seer or prophet, but because it was there. We’d been doing things that would bring this about” (Bazin, 1987, p. 119).

As a responsible writer, Gordimer takes up the new challenges of the social turmoil, by giving a fictional body to the uprising, in *July’s People*, when the narrator notes that the street fights “began prosaically weirdly. The strikes of 1980 had dragged on, one inspires or brought about by solidarity with another until the walkout and the shut-down were lived with as contiguous and continuous phenomena rather than industrial chaos” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 7).

This is the first note of the dystopian critique that Gordimer launches against the nationalist regime in South Africa, a regime whose brutality and hypocrisy have provoked the calamitous decline of society and individuals. Such a dystopian impulse deployed by the author is articulated in an exposition and denunciation of the ideas and patterns of apartheid, built on the ironical structures and incoherences swarming the narrative. Through this option, Gordimer derides whites’ supposed superiority who are reclaiming South Africa as their “home;” she also vents her discontent against the liberals, through the Smales who utterly reject racism and yet cling to material objects, they are not willing to share with blacks.

Saved by their servant July from the riots in Johannesburg, Bam and Maureen Smales are relocated to the latter’s village, as they no longer know where to fit in the environmental ruin and social strife created by the government’s oppressive political line and the military counterattack of revolutionaries. Their new life in the village is a far cry from the sumptuous life they have led before the war undermined the props that supported their privilege (Erritoumi, 2006, p. 70). Such a contrast, which brings to the forefront the neat opposition between the space of opulence where they lived and that of destitution, offered by July, is what welcomes the reader in the opening lines of story:

July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind has always done for their kind.

The knock on the door. Seven o’clock. In governors’ residences, commercial hotel rooms, shift bosses’ company bungalows, master bedrooms en suite—the tea-tray in black hands smelling of Lifebuoy soap.

The knock on the door

no door, an aperture in thick mud walls, and the sack that hung over it looped back for air, sometime during the short night (Gordimer, 1981, p. 1, my emphasis).

The passage compares, from Maureen’s perspective, the Smales’ morning routine “back there” with the one they have in July’s people. It opens with the mention “as his kind has always done for their kind” which is not only a subtle image of racial tension, a culture of servitude society assigns to blacks in the country but also, it is a mark of irony anunciating the reality of their new life in the country. This is further highlighted in the juxtaposition of the two starkly different morning routines, in the city – with all the privileges, under the service of blacks – and in the village, with an “aperture in thick mud walls, that
Maureen can hardly take for a door, as it’s no door like those “in governors’ residences, commercial hotel rooms, shift bosses’ company bungalows, master bedrooms en suite.” The stylistic shift – “the knock on the door/no door” – is an ideological marker that implicitly showcases the level of destitution in the village. Such interregnum morbidity is reflected in the tragic situation striking cities in South Africa but mainly in the space of material deprivation and lack of basic facilities where the Smales and their kids are hiding.

With no other option “but the impossible” (living in an unknown and primitive space), the couple (Bam more than Maureen) tries to survive and adapt themselves to the hut which is one of the pathological symptoms; it is the image of the policies of deprivation and alienation inherent in the apartheid system. Indeed, Maureen and Bam are strangers in a foreign land. More than the latter, the former feels lost; she “was in another time, place, consciousness; it pressed in upon her and filled her as someone’s breath fills a balloon’s shape” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 29). Besides, Maureen experiences what André Brink reads as a pathology of identity, a crisis of consciousness, a crisis of having and being. She was already not what she was living through temporal and spatial dislocation, a situation much symbolical of the social disintegration of the whole society. Analyzing subjectivity, alterity, and futurity in the novel, Peter Blair notes that the displacement of the Smales is “intra-national (from urban to rural) and across the nation’s racialized class stratification (from affluence to poverty) …” (Blair, 2019, p. 109). This commentary casts fresh light on “the desire for power” that has so far stimulated the “having mode” of the Smales’ existence (Brink, 1994, p. 159), who are reduced to their most primitive condition. The hut allotted to them by July, replacing the cozy suburban home/bedroom, is symbolical of the debilitating condition of blacks, the target of the deleterious patterns of apartheid. It is “a hut defined very early as “the prototype from which all the others had come and to which all returned” (Gordimer, p. 2), “the hut in which all relations within the family are redefined and all relations with the world outside determined;” (Brink, 1994, p. 166). As a prototypical image, the hut is now their “corner of the world, (...) a place that allows for daydreaming” (Bachelard, 1958), p. 4). Yet the Smales reluctantly format their mind into accepting the new abode as the vantage point from which they can imagine different lives and understand their true selves. Brink’s analysis of the place – as a locus for the redefinition of family and social relations – hints at its allegorical significance. Indeed, it is a sign of the social context operative in the novel, foregrounding the racial tension and the alienation of characters, especially the white couple. The hut, with its material lack, is a symbolic place where the author, can enact her utopian vision of the new society, and thus give mental signs of the society that is to come out of the gloomy one in which the characters live.

However, unlike many commentators, such as Mahmoud Radwan, who have pegged as derogatory the representation of the space of poverty and the impoverished space in July’s village, one should note that the crude expression of the dingy reality in the novel is another encoded expression of the author’s lifelong struggle to disclose the deep impacts of the “systematically racist South African policy that sought to dehumanize the black citizenry” (Nicholls, 2011, p. 1). That disintegration of life and the difficulty of whites to adapt to their new environment of destitution, combined with the dramatirical irony of the Smales imagining power-sharing with July and his people is reflected “through three symbols revolving around three objects in the novel: a pickup truck, a radio and a shot gun” (Sistani, 2016, p. 86). These objects are symbols of power, modernity, and security for the Smales who clam to them, despite their grand discourses on fairness towards the marginalized other.

The radio is their only link to the world of “civilization.” They depend on the object, with Bam desperately searching for a station that would bring updates on the conflict that has confined them into the rural space. The full import of the object in the eyes of the Smales is driven home when the narrator informs that “the radio station they depended on had been off the air for twenty-four hours; must have been a battle going on for control of the station” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 37). Thus, the radio, which was “back there” a banal tool that was part of daily routine has now become vital for the Smales who need to have reports of the dystopian time in the cities. Reasoning on the symbolism of the radio, Sistani argues that it “illuminates the extent of the Smaleses temporal dislocation from the outside world, as well as their growing sense of alienation from one another” (Sistani, 2016, p. 91).

Likewise, the bakkie (the yellow pickup) is another symbolical object, the possession, and control of which stirs much tension between the white masters and their servant-savior, July. In fact, “with [a] psyche shaped to the specification of Western consumer capitalism” (109), they refuse to share one of the last vestiges of their life under the ancient regime, namely the bakkie, their vehicle” (Erritouni, 1006, p. 70). Living in the dystopic interregnum era, overnight stripped of all their material and technological possessions, and hardly controlling the trajectory of their lives, the couple will not let July and Daniel have control over the vehicle. Maureen and Bam are taken aback and utterly worried about seeing July use the car without their consent, because this means to them, the empowerment of the servant. This is a telling sign of the dreadful “new” system, imagined from the hectic present, and that requires the inevitable redistribution of the wealth hitherto secured by whites. The restlessness of the characters is outlined in this sequence:
She kept her knowledge of the vehicle as a possession to which she was curiously entitled, had no
incumbency to reveal. Each one for himself. (…) Bam had not greeted him. Maureen was unbelieving to see on the white man’s face the old, sardonic, controlled challenge of the patron. – And where were you yesterday? What’s your story? – (…) -We were very worried. – her amplification was the flattery, ‘about you’.
Bam stepped through a minefield of words before he chose what to say. – Who drove the bakkie? -I got someone he’s drive for me (Gordimer, 1981, p. 52-3, my italics).

The tension between the couple and July (who stubbornly considers himself the “boy” of the Smales (p. 69), and as such he must provide food for the Masters) is reflected in Bam’s refusal to greet him. The bakkie is a vital possession, and Bam cannot believe that July has contested his exclusive right and authority over the bakkie. He complaints: “I would never have thought he would do something like that. He’s always been so correct.” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 58)
The subsequent confrontation between Maureen and July over the control of the bakkie and the gun (another expressive symbol) is not only a question of power control between whites and blacks but more, it suggests a gender-based conflict. Indeed, the gun is another object the Smales are adamant to keep, however grim their interregnal life is. The gun calls back to mind the Manichean relationship between blacks and whites; it is a symbol of white domination, the loss of which spurs the wrath of the couple who feels now totally alienated from their world. Bam Smales is infuriated when he could not find it: “–My gun? – (…) –You’re not going to shoot your own people. You wouldn’t kill blacks. (…) -You’re not going to take guns and help the white government kill blacks, are you? Are you?” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 119-20, my italics).

Such a reaction from the white man, in front of the village Chief, raises the racial tension opposing blacks and whites, especially during the interregnal period. The irony around the words of the Chief – “You’re not going to shoot your own people. You wouldn’t kill blacks” – adds to the drama lived through by the couple, because, as the Chief suggests, the people in July’s village are now their people, to whom they owe everything. Bam and Maureen, while striving to adapt to the new environment, are still bound by an instinctive mania of keeping guns. Thus, although it was a shared truth that “the blacks had no guns and feared the tusk” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 74), although July, “back there” “had always kept surreptitiously clear of shot-guns” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 75), the reality is that the conflict opposing the nationalist regime to black fighters, is “a war. It’s not like that, any more… The blacks have also got guns. Bombs (…). All kinds of things. Same as the white army everything that kills.” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 116-7)
The gun, therefore, is more symbolical an object now in the possession of the blacks in the war, as it infers the military empowerment of the latter and, consequently, a threat to whites. This “explosion of role” (Gordimer,1981, p. 117), and how it makes the privileged of the system vulnerable (illustrated in Bam’s anger and panic when he discovers that it is Daniel who took the gun) is a devastating irony through which Nadine Gordimer teaches whites that “a societal structure vastly different from that built to the specifications of white power and privileges” (Gordimer,1988, pp. 264-5), based on “a more equitable distribution of wealth [that] may be enforced by laws” (Gordimer. 1988, p. 265), will soon set in.

Another reading of the symbolism of the gun is possible with André Brink. He analyses it within the framework of patriarchy (the patterns of which he parallels with the apartheid system) and takes the gun as the expression of masculine domination: “striped of all the trappings of masculinity and (consequent) power – first the bakkie, then the definitive phallic symbol, the gun, Bam is reduced to a state of utter devastation…” (Brink, 1994, p. 163, my italics) Indeed, the gun and the bakkie provoke confrontations between July and one of his people, Maureen, during three encounters (Gordimer, 1981, pp. 68-9. 70-1-3) that could be well read as “three stations on Maureen’s progress from “having” to “being”, from the dying “old” toward the as yet unborn “new” (Brink, 1994, p. 170). However, these encounters are much more the terrain of a confrontation of power between Maureen and July. Ironically, the woman’s discourse towards July reflects a relationship of servitude of the black man to her, in a situation where her dependency on July is at its peak. While admitting to the Chief that “[they] owe [July] everything” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 121), the straight mind of the white woman (and her husband) still cannot accept their servant, albeit savior from the chaos in Johannesburg, moves from the station of “being,” to “having,” through the latter’s uncensored use of the bakkie and the gun. The humorous note is that July’s and Maureen’s “very attempts at redefining themselves in these encounters are conditioned by the role-playing of patriarchy” and the meetings are turned into “confrontations characterized by power-play” (Brink, 1994, p. 170).

Thus, the foregrounding of the mitigated and hypocritical reactions of the couple faced to July’s “initiatives” to make sure that they fit the new and starkly different living context is Gordimer’s virulent diatribe against whites, especially the liberal coterie. Let us repeat it with Brenda Nicholls, *July’s People* is a blueprint narrative marking the author’s radicalization in the struggle against oppression, materialized by a refusal to console or plead for the liberals and their unquestioned assumptions about racial equality in South Africa (Erritoumi, 2006, p. 70). Although the story does not peg the Smales as victims or villains, it, however, exposes their unwilling collision with apartheid (Visser in Erritoumi, 2006, p. 70). Gordimer
castigates the couple’s consumerist and capitalistic mind that accounts for their objection to allowing July free access to their material possessions. She rebukes the implicit implication of the liberals with apartheid, cloaked in their humane treatment, under the form of “shoddy or ugly,” and no longer valued objects (Gordimer, 1981, p. 67) given as gifts to fairly treated servants. By rejecting the imposed utopian focus of the nationalist regime, Gordimer is part of postcolonial writers who, following Pordzik’s analysis, create dystopias that begin with the negativity of rejecting the colonial system (…) and then move on to challenge the postcolonial nation that should replace it (Pordzik, 2011, p. 42).

Therefore, in the ambient morbidity of the interregnum time, Bam and Maureen endure a dilemma now that they have to cope with their knotty life. Entrapped by existential problems, caused by their incoherence-laden positions, and open conflicts with July, they titter between the avowed will to treat blacks as equals, as a core principle of their cause, and the reluctance to share the material possessions and privileges. They are enmeshed in their grand liberal discourses and the dystopian reality of the interregnum marked by the dislocation of time, space, and personhood. This is more ironic as Nadine Gordimer “makes it clear that sharing property is the litmus test for the white South African liberal position.” (Erritoumi, 2006, p. 74)

Failing to take up the challenge of formatting their mind into accepting the new power dynamics and social exigences in the interregnum and later in the future society, the Smales - July’s erstwhile white masters, now his people - can hardly comply with the nascent reality of postapartheid society, to be born from the ashes of the “old” and moribund regime, a new utopian age that should rise up from the fog of the season’s end.

III. JULY’S PEOPLE: A UTOPIAN METAFICTION OF POSTAPARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

In The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia (2011), Ralph Pordzik explores utopia in postcolonial writing from countries such as Australia, Canada, Nigeria, Canada, South Africa, etc. Going from the postulate that utopian literature has been analyzed from European and North American perspectives, he casts light on new trends in literary utopia and calls for its examination in the “larger scope of postcolonial literature.” He affirms that the Anglo-American literary utopia has reached a point of “exhaustion,” wherein its “attempts to create a radically different society based on humanist or Marxist ideals” have generated nothing more than “totalitarian rule - put into effect in the name of justice and equality” (Pordzik, 2011, p. 4)

Subsequently, he brings to light how writers in the postcolonial context, writers like Nadine Gordimer, in creating multicultural narrative worlds, with individuals scrambling to outdo the personae of race, have marked a qualitative and ideological break with the European vision of utopia. These authors are part of “an international culture, of postcolonial writers [that] has written against the utopian tradition and produced a heterotopian variant (the postcolonial approach to utopia designed by writers to compose narratives that promote plurality) that embraces a new level of literary hybridity.” (Pordzik, 2011, p. 4) This is to infer that the utopian work of fiction produced within postcolonial territories “invites readers to experience vicariously an alternative reality that critiques theirs by opening cognitive and affective spaces that encourage readers to perceive the realities and potentials of their own culture in new ways” (Roemer, 2003, p. 20).

The South Africa in July’s People, reflects those sites that Michel Foucault calls “utopias,” (…) with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of “Society” (Foucault, 1984, p. 3). Gordimer presents a “society turned upside down,” with the ambition to project, from the adverse narrative space, “a perfected form” (Foucault, 1984, p. 3) of what she imagines to be the real space of the society after apartheid. This is a striking expression of the futuristic approach in the novel, woven around her “future-centric engagement with the past that opens up the present to new political, cultural, and ethical possibilities.” (Eshel, 2012) By reforming the European dystopic genre, and by outlining the contours of what can be called a postcolonial utopia, Nadine Gordimer, as it will be illustrated, explores the future of her country from a “postcolonial cross-cultural point of view” (Pordzik, 2011, p. 156).

July’s People is a postcolonial utopian story, a utopographic metafiction because it is a prospective vision of the future, unclear as its lineaments are, of South Africa after the end of racial oppression. Indeed, by looking at her society from a utopian lens, the anti-apartheid writer envisions a legal, political and social transformation of the structures of racism, hinged on a new social contract that should bind South Africans from all racial lines. In this society to be born after the painful demise of the old one, Gordimer writes, “the black knows he will be at home, at last, in the future. The white who has declared himself or herself for that future (…) does not know whether he will find his home at last?” (1988, p. 270). The story does not cast a retrospective gaze at the past to figure out the reasons for the madness of apartheid. Rather, its speculative allure showcases the author’s will to grapple with “the challenges of both today and tomorrow” (Eshel, 2012) by “bringing to light how reflections of the past create tools for the future” of her nation.

As an optimist writer, despite the bleak narrative in July’s People, Gordimer looks resolutely at the layers of the future sprinkling on the horizon, from what Pordzik describes as a “postcolonial cross point of view.”
Carrying her imagined postapartheid society further, Gordimer, through the children’s immersion in the village life, from the characters’ desperate attempts to redefine their interpersonal relationships, and through the open ending of the story, “does not offer a full-fledged ideal commonwealth, for instance in the tradition of Thomas Mores’ utopia.” On the contrary, the author expresses cautious optimism as to the interracial connections in the new society. She has full consciousness that political and social justice will be a daunting question to settle. Yet her positive stance for the future postcolonial/postmodern society is suggested in Bam’s progressive integration into the new environment and his valuable contribution to the improvement of community life, with the building of the water tank. It is also contended in Maureen who was othering black children by comparing the cough of her kids to that of the latter but grows to notice that black and white kids are the same. The reader follows Maureen through the alleys of the text, who turns into a more open-minded character; she even knows now how to make porridge (Gordimer, 1981, p. 55) and learns to adapt herself to the “primitive” way of the women in menstruation (Gordimer, 1981, p. 67).

This capacity of adaptation, unimagined “back there,” is a possibility among the many thought-out by the author, to bring in whites’ consciousness that their social and economic privileges ensured by the apartheid regime, could overnight disappear and the only alternatives left to them might be resorting to “backward” ways. The above excerpt suggests that Gordimer is part of the postcolonial novelists that Pordzik labeled “utopographers”, who are not only rebelling against the prescriptive closure of classical utopian novels” (Erritoumi, 2006, p. 75). July’s People is a utopographic fiction as it is her way to imagine new political and ethical possibilities because it offers “a fictional strategy to disrupt the hierarchized relation between reality and fiction which dominates tradition utopian writing with its ideological bias toward social realism and the systemic closure it ministers to” (Pordzik, 2011, p. 113).

Truly, the Smale’s children are the most vivid expression of Gordimer’s fictional strategy to counter the ideological biased ideas of race separation. In her dogged will to imagine a new social terrain, based on “a cross-cultural dialogue” (Pordzik, 2011, p. 143), that calls for a radical “otherness in a new and varied evolution of community” (Harris, in Pordzik, 2011, p. 143), a “utopianism of alterity of the esthetics of hybridity that favors continual openness and flux” (Pordzik, 2011, p. 144), Gordimer relies much on the innocence and the adaptation capacity of the children, to show the way to racial cohesion in her country.

While the adults (Bam and Maureen) are moping about the material dearth of the hut, while they “experience traumatic changes in the endeavor to acquire a new order in postapartheid South Africa,” (Radwan, 2015, p. 17), their children, especially Victor “seemed to understand what the black children said; and at least had picked up the ceremonial or ritual jargon of their games, shouting out what must be equivalent of ‘Beaten you!’ ‘My turn!’ ‘Cheat!’” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 68). Maureen successively realizes that her kids are the same as the ones in July’s village and, as the narrator says, “she no longer had to worry about [them]; she fed them; they know how to look after themselves, like the black children” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 125). Gordimer’s utopianism of alterity is much more expressed in the “strength of Gina Smale’s friendship with Nyiho [which] bodes well for the future of the races in South Africa.” (Erritoumi, 2006, p. 156-7) Gina, who is seen learning to make clay oxen from her contact with the black children, who “was at home among the chickens, earth ashes and communal mealie-meat pots of July’s place” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 121), easily befriended with Nyiho. Carrying his commentary on the special friendship between the two girls, that seas of incoherence and contradictions could have separated, the narrator says this: “Nyiho has appeared early in the doorway. Her tender curls sift sunlight, one pinked-soled foot hooks round a tiny black ankle as she waits for her friend Gina. The little girls smile and don’t speak before the others; their friendship is too deep and secret for that.” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 156-7, my italics). The exceptionally unusual relationship between the two girls, in the pandemonium of the interregnum, is expressed in the present mode, in the passage. This is the sign of a certain timelessness of children’s innocence and uncorrupted mind, and of the possibility for races to converge in a near future. The shift in style is another trait of the postcolonial utopian vision of the author, the primal step of which is not an overnight socio-political transformation but what Pordzik describes as “fiction-making” (Pordzik, 2011, p. 150). In other words, Nadine Gordimer, conscious that alterity and social transformation should be the object of pondering by receptive minds, thinks of democracy and egalitarian community through fiction-making; this can inspire the establishment of cultural and racial plurality, through an esthetic tapestry that challenges the provisional “eutopian” (Pordzik, 2011, p. 150) achievements, both in the narrative in July’s People and the South African material world.

Though Gordimer avoids “prescription and contends itself with adumbrating fresh possibilities,” (Erritoumi, 2006, p. 73), the voicing of her hope for that erratic, yet so dreamt-of future, culminates in the story through the last and not the least symbolical image: the helicopter.

The helicopter “has sprung through the hot brilliant cloud just above them all, its landing gear like spread legs, battling the air with whirling scythes” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 158, my italics). The helicopter, appearing from nowhere, and rising through the hot brilliant cloud (a possible symbol for apartheid), provokes excitement in the villagers, and stirs joy, and excitement in all July’s people, the villagers, and Maureen as well, who are “exhilarated rather than frightened; they have seen aircraft before, but never so close-
flight was more stirringly entertaining that the voice of the amplifier” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 158-9).

The meaning of the flying machine and above all Maureen’s running has been the object of many controversial analyses. Indeed, as Brink outlines, “if the helicopter suggests copulation, what becomes important in its wake is precisely Maureen’s reaction. What she runs from, what she runs towards, how she runs.” (Brink, 1994, p. 173). While Margaret Lenta considers that Maureen’s running means “leaving, not joining” (Lenta, 1990, p. 135), Stephen Clingman opines that the running in the last scene symbolizes the character’s will to break with old structures and relationships towards her revolutionary destiny (Clingman, 1988, p. 203). Nancy Baily reads it as Maureen’s attempt to “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.” (Bailey, 1984, p. 222). As for Ali Erritoumi, he bases his discussion of Maureen’s reaction to the symbolic object on Ruth Levitas’ concept of utopia as the transformation of subjectivity, to conclude that Maureen’s run toward the helicopter may be seen as utopian (Erritoumi, 2006, p. 76).

Of the plethora of controversial studies on the ending of July’s People, I concur with the relevant discussion of André Brink who considers the highly charged scene the final birth of the new political era (1994, p. 174). Maureen’s first reaction explained by the narrator is suggestive of her resolute will to follow the flying object:

Above yells, exclamations, discussions and laughter, she follows the scudding of the engine up there behind cloud. (…). She is running to the river and she hears them, the man’s voice and the voice of the children speaking English somewhere to the left (…) she moves out into the water like some member of a baptismal sect to be born again, … (Gordimer, 1981, p. 159, my italics).

The idea that Maureen’s running is the symbol of her yearning for rebirth resonates much in the quoted lines. She paces and then runs after the mechanic butterfly, and to the river, “which has always been the bedrock of the new society, unfettered by arbitrariness, binary oppositions, and racial prejudices. Maureen’s moving out into the river “like some member of a baptismal sect to be born again,” is a clear repetition of Gramsci’s epigraph. “She runs: trusting herself with all the suppressed trust of a lifetime, alert, like a solitary animal at the season when animals neither seek a mate nor enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility. She can still hear the beat, beyond the trees, and those, and she runs towards it. She runs.” (Gordimer, 1981, p. 160). Therefore, Maureen runs for renaissance and survival in the hectic interregnal time. Looked through the lenses of Pordzik’s postcolonial utopianism, Maureen’s running marks a break from patriarchal/apartheid abuses; it is a sign of Gordimer’s vision of the New South Africa as an open country, resisting political restrictions and closure; at last freed from the pervasive tentacles of racism, where citizens, stripped from the personae of race, can, like the white woman, run towards and meat the racial Other. This is underpinned by Brink who considers the movement of Bam’s wife as “a moment of historical choice which insert Maureen into a larger context” (Brink, 1994, p. 176) to confirm Visser’s reading of “revolutionary optimism” (In Brink, 1994, p. 176).

As a utopographic metafiction, July’s People gives body to the author’s utopian imagination. The novel, especially the ending scene, is thus the space where Gordimer’s fictional strategies are successfully implemented to create “an open-ended utopian horizon out of the desolation of the dystopian present” (Pordzik, 2011, p. 63), the interregnum is for both blacks and whites. The running is, therefore, consonant with the writer’s optimism and transcultural mind symbolized by the opened-ending scene and her belief that possibilities for fairer social relationships can be enacted, beyond the interregnum. Although South Africans hardly know how to look at each other, in the transiting days, the last installment of the novel means this: South Africans, in their diversity and differences, should run toward and face the impeding future, “whatever it may hold in terms of salvation or death – [and] demonstrate the need for, and the possibility of choice, in the interregnum” (Brink, 1994, p. 176). This is the personal, social, and cultural rebirth of all the peoples, caught in the inclement context represented in the novel, and that would be a bedrock of the new society, unfettered by arbitrariness, binary oppositions, and racial prejudices. This new social order will be fed on “a politics that will nurture material justice before [they] can hope to live in peace. A new constitution, new laws must change the economic circumstances of the majority; healing can take place only on that honesty of purpose.” (Gordimer, 1990, p. 145) This is the true openness she has been all her life working for and writing about.

IV. CONCLUSION: IS THE REAL POSTAPARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA GORDIMER’S IMAGINED SPACE?

Exposing watershed events in the modernist context of apartheid, July’s People displays its author’s prospective gaze at the past, which can lead to political, and ethical alternatives to be implemented in the present. The paper aimed to demonstrate the way it represents Gordimer’s imagination of the new South Africa, a projection that goes with a deconstruction of the ideology of racism – through the Smales’
hesitancy to share or “lose control” over material objects – and through signs that reveal her postcolonial utopianism.

The study has explained that the author, in her radical opposition to apartheid, foregrounds the physical degradation and mental ruin caused by a supposed hierarchical purity of the race, which is untenable. In her staunch critique of the regime and its upholders, especially the liberals’ ambivalent stance, the author has not failed to showcase the morbidity of life in the period of transition, a period particularly cataclysmic, with people scrambling to cling to privileges from the old regime and panicked by the unpredictability of the inevitable yet painful birth of the new political order.

As a white writer in a country where the non-white majority is the target of oppression, Gordimer’s “task as a cultural worker is to raise the consciousness of white people, who, unlike [herself], have not woken up” (1984, p. 12). She nourishes the dream of a new South Africa, symbolized by the utopian projection beyond the interregnum, and imagines, with the reader, the bearing of new social and economic paradigms on interpersonal relationships. Signs of the upcoming life are unfolded in the painful and tense encounters between Maureen and July, which are not only an allegory of future cohabitation between races but also, the sites for the redefinition of roles and power dynamics.

In *July’s People*, the children’s natural immersion into the local culture and the opened-ending scene, bears hope, albeit frail, for better days, a new experience that can counter the dying and lying days of the old dehumanizing regime. As a finale, the analysis has discussed the postcolonial utopianism or utopianism of alterity reflected in the story, mostly insinuated in the final scene. It can be asserted that the author’s perceived utopian society is significantly a better version of the “present” one described in the novel, a utopian image of the society beyond the dystopian context which is a way for her to keep alive the utopian impulse expressed in *July’s People* and through which characters can resist restriction or closure.

What about the real postapartheid South Africa? Is it really the one dreamt of by Gordimer? To what extent has her projection come true? I should like to speak now of the real postapartheid society and the unreal one drawn by the writer.

Nadine Gordimer has lived through the first decades of the new democratic rule in her country, with its complications, ranging from the complexities deriving from the problem of national reconciliation, the unbridled inter/intra-racial violence but also the tension born from the thorny question of power redistribution inherent in the new political dispensation. In *July’s People*, the author anticipates a post-revolution society based on new and fairer paradigms and policies that could lead to racial equality and reconciliation, the primal step of which is the possibility for whites to realize the extent and depth of their oppressions against non-white communities. Her commitment to humanity, her “future-centric engagement” brings Gordimer to imagine the future through the eyes of the present, to disclose the streaks of freedom from the dark days that have negatively marked the historical evolution of apartheid South Africa.

Her postapartheid fictions, namely *The House Gun* (1998), and *No Time Like the Present* (2012), are terrains where she takes the responsibility to unpack the complications for black people to get back their confiscated lands, the intricacies for whites (both nationalists and liberals) to feel finally at home in the new political and social context. Through allegorical representations of the implications of the new dispensation, she scrolls down the list of problems in her postmodern society: cities and towns still segregated, decades after apartheid, with the creeping evolution of determined urban planning; accrued gender-based violence, (with alarming rape rates); ethnic disparities in access to care; xenophobic attacks on African immigrants stirred by lingering social inequalities, both between and intra-races, fueled by “overlapping regimes of domination, whether economic, patriarchal, heteronormative or others” (Van der Westhuizen, 2022).

Yet, between white reluctant democrats resisting power sharing and wealth redistribution (the first signs of which are announced in the Smales’ refusal to share the few material goods with July) and the ablaze social context, Nadine Gordimer’s clarion call for political and social justice is the building of an inclusive democracy in which all South Africans, from all racial, sexual, or cultural backgrounds, can enjoy equal citizenship status. Convinced with Homi Bhabha that graded ‘purity’ of cultures is undefendable, in the postmodern era, Gordimer has reiterated this ethical principle in all her writings, especially in July’s People. But, though this vision of plurality, based on decentered consciousness and rebutting univocal forms of authority, is clearly expressed in the new constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the real South Africa is somehow similar to the one predicted by Gordimer in *July’s People*: it is still a polarized postmodern world with sectarian consciousness driving racial groups and preventing them from constructing a transcultural social order within the conflict zone produced by white colonization. It still is a heterotopia, a space in which South Africans live, which draws them out of themselves, in which the erosion of their lives, their time and history occurs; the space that claws and gnaws at them, a heterogeneous space (Foucault, 1984, p. 3). Nonetheless, despite all impediments and diffidence, Gordimer remains more “than a writer”, balking to kowtow to nationalist coterie and black extremists, boosted by the need to “fulfill the demands of her society, and the conviction that South Africa can become a rainbow nation, the home for all its denizens. This has been the lifeblood of her lifelong political commitment and literary career.
REFERENCES


Since then, she has embarked on an academic career at Gaston Berger University, which has embraced teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as research activities. Dr. Diallo’s research embraces gender-based violence in post-apartheid literature, African feminist literature, female genital mutilation in African and African American literature, and women’s verbal arts in West Africa. She is currently an Assistant Professor in African cultural studies and women, gender and sexuality studies, at Gaston Berger University. Her research, which embraces gender-based violence in post-apartheid literature, African feminist literature, female genital mutilation in African and African American literature, women’s verbal arts in West Africa, and postmodernism, has led to the publication of many articles such as Signs of Gendered Violence from the Threshold: The Epigraph in Nuruddin Farah’s From a Crooked Rib (Revue Malienne de Langues et de Littératures, Mali, 2020); Marzama Ba: An Early Intersectional Feminist (International Journal of English Language and Translation Studies, 8 (4), Tripoli, Lybia, 2020); Nadine Gordimer’s The House Gun: A Postmodern Text (Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies, Online, June 2018).

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