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Race and Gender Intersectionality in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the notion of intersectionality with particular context to the interconnectedness of race, class, power dynamics, ethnicity, and gender in South Africa. The term intersectionality refers to shared identities, as gender, sexual orientation, class, caste, and disability, are interconnected and produce different kinds of oppression and discrimination for those who are marginalised. It is becoming more and more apparent that addressing interrelated oppression and persistent gender inequality requires using an intersectional paradigm in research. This framework can be used globally to understand the various axes of power within a society that lead to the further marginalisation of specific groups of women and races. Based on a social class perspective, South African culture was uneven. It was classified among the upper class, middle class, and poverty-stricken, as acknowledged by the administration. The fact that Gordimer's novels are so competent and evolved as fiction explains why they are important historically. *July's People* was written at the time when apartheid was at its peak in South Africa. The novel portrays both racial and gender investigations of South African society. An analytical approach would be followed with the help of primary text and secondary sources such as articles, interviews, and essential books to develop a critical analysis method. The paper intends to look at gender and race inequalities in South Africa through Gordimer's novel, as the country has suffered from this aculeus for more than 50 years.

Keywords: Intersectionality, South Africa, gender, race and marginalization.

Introduction

It is to be noticed that the legacy of black feminist criticism gave rise to Intersectionality. It is widely used in the humanities to contribute to the theoretical understanding of concurrently held subject positions and their relationships to identify categories and social divisions. Something that intersects another thing is referred to as intersectional. The nomenclature of Intersectionality relates to phenomena that intersect with something else. The notion of Intersectionality alludes to a set of theoretical positions that explore to mend the perception that identity classifies and the set of social relations in which they are stationed.

Exploring intersecting kind of discussion leads us to comprehend social relations through the lens of intersectionality. This necessitates the intricacy of social organisations and for much oppression such as ageism, ableism, casteism, sexism and racism may coexist and present in be active in a person's life. Intersectionality aims to understand and remove the potential barriers to a human being's or group's well-being. It was American legal expert Kimberley Crenshaw who used the term "intersectionality" which came as an extension to the Black feminist movement. Crenshaw said that feminist and anti-racist movements were both ignoring the difficulties what actually black women experience.

In Crenshaw's law-oriented articles, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989) and "Mapping the Margins" (1991), she argued the unprecedented occurrences of native African women, shedding light on how they connect to the poles, especially alongside gender and race, and centred on the occurrences not generally conveyed in the discussion of the inequality on the basis of race and gender. Dependent on comprehensive and authentic membership acknowledgement across African civilisations, the junction of these various acknowledgements in action, as lived experience, has both intended and unforeseen repercussions. Gender, race, and class are examples of labels or identities that might be intersectional. Above-mentioned intersections can increase, decrease, or stabilise a group's or individual's access to assets, portability, and political and economic fairness. These interactions could be amid a single person or organizations that identify as belonging to particular population groupings or centred upon obvious membership issues that people or groups encounter. According to Crenshaw, intersectionality is the most frequently studied by Western academics in

terms of gender, race, and class - a perspective that is becoming more and more contested; as she points out:

Intersectionality is a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory. In mapping the intersections of race and gender, the concept does engage dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories...suggesting a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable...the concept [intersectionality] can and should be expanded by factoring in issues such as class, sexual orientation, age, [colonialism], and colour. (60, 2015)

Crenshaw differentiates intersectionality by emphasising that in actual life, identifying memberships are never isolated - neither for those who live inside multiple memberships nor for other persons they interact with. All of the forms of intersectionality are depicted in the African setting, from resistance, both pull and push to adoption and adaption of the Western institute of society, in addition to from Africa's indigenous civilisation. African identities were either denied or suppressed for these historically imposed systems – economic educational, political and religious – to come into being.

As Crenshaw discusses, Intersectionality can be understood from the perspective of “othering.” Patricia Hill Collins asserts the othering of identity as the binary establishes of exploitation to justify its usage in maintaining dominant vs. non-dominant groups, such as male-female, white/black, and rich/poor. Patricia elaborates: “Difference is defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its “other.”... they are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites.” (70, 2000)

Discussion

The writings of Gordimer have always featured the imagery of South Africa. Gordimer portrayed her culture in the form of social shifts and it is clearly visible in her decades-long body of work that is written during and after apartheid. Her works of fiction are primarily about identity, gender, and class exile. In a similar vein, Gordimer's protagonists fight both their own identities and society's expectations. Furthermore, to serving examples of how South African

culture has changed, her characters also have to deal with a patriarchal system in which they are limited with power. In her work, Gordimer has examined the arbitrary classification of the male-dominated structures that seek to explore her characters. Gordimer also highlights the conflict between gender roles and social class.

The writings of Gordimer depict various feminine places during and after apartheid in multiple eras of the artist's development. Gordimer's characters' roles have grown over her writing career to address themes of race and gender discrimination and the possibility of relationships in communal and gendered settings beyond South Africa.

It was unsurprising that Gordimer's work has changed critique, given the length of her writing career. There is ample documentation of Gordimer's fictional and private attempts to address racial and gender-based socioeconomic concerns that were prominent in South Africa during and after apartheid. Her writings make one reevaluate the dimensions between men and women and White and Blacks. Nonetheless, Gordimer has had a conflicted and ambivalent relationship with feminism itself.

In her initial interactions, critics have learned that Gordimer was unwilling "to think herself as a feminist writer" (Driver 33) and she "expressed impatience with the feminist movement." (Head 19) Robin Visel admits that though Gordimer "said several times that the women's liberation movement is irrelevant in South Africa," (34) her fiction writings depict that this statement was oversimplified.

Gordimer never claimed herself a propagator of feminism, and she considers herself a writer who is also a woman; she "gives particular polemical force to her documentation of inequality in male-female relationships by employing it to define female growth." (Driver 34) In addition, Gordimer's body of work provides a wealth of insight into how women create identities under constrained cultural contexts. As Karan Lazar acknowledges in her article *Something Out There*, Gordimer's writing "shows the potential for transgression, for alternative ways of seeing, amidst the existence of patriarchal-cum-racist stereotypes." (58)

In her obligation to rehabilitate South African historical events and communities, Gordimer has taken her part as a responsible and intellectual writer that she is at the centre 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 166) Gordimer’s novels are a deep-bone consideration of the repercussions 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 29)

In all Gordimer’s writings, *July’s People* (1981), was published amidst the structured racial disparity. The plot of the novel speculates in the post-apartheid duration. The occurrences of the story are, essentially, as an authoritative critique of how racial exploitation torments social life, and, later on, they impart abundant expectations for the future of livelihoods. Nevertheless, the story reveals clues about the aftermath of the revolutions and the changes brought about by the new political age amid the disordered nature of the events and symbolically, much-discussed in open-ended ending. However, Gordimer does not provide clear guidelines for the kind of society that will upsurge from the ashes of apartheid.

July’s People gives much elusive knowledge for its portrayal of the arid contemporary life in which Gordimer focuses upon life beyond the nonappearance of white domination as apartheid. It has been thoroughly observed by Ali Erritouni in his argument of the dystopian viewpoint and utopian projections of a more egalitarian society; he observes that this novel “draws a grim picture of South Africa in order not only to expose the social and economic consequences of apartheid but also to open up utopian horizons beyond it.” (69)

July’s People, the seminal works of Gordimer, was printed in 1981, prior to the eradication of racial discrimination and Apartheid government (ended in 1994 with the establishment of Mandela’s African National Congress Party, Hazlett: *Apartheid*). This novel was an effort of her exposition to how Apartheid would end. The novel was banned soon after its release in South Africa. The setting of the novel is in a made-up South Africa where Whites and Blacks are engaged in a civil war. In the novel Smale couple, Bam and Maureen are forced to escape from their place to July’s place. It was such a strange time that Black and White people weren’t able to establish any harmony between them. The Smale couple are from white family that fled the conflict in Johannesburg and are now refugees in the community of their black servant July. *July’s People* provides an excellent overview of Gordimer’s work; discussing and illuminating white people’s behaviour towards Black people and how this loss is felt. Simultaneously, Gordimer unfolds the resistance of forcefully imposing the Afrikaans language

on blacks. By doing this, the government wanted to diminish the accessibility of black children and deprive them of global knowledge. This act created plenty of concern in the South African political arena. The novel centres around the inter-racial relationship delineated by the bond between Maureen, and additional character, particularly her servant, July. The novel also reflects the energy of balance change for White individuals deprived of authority gradually and at the mercy of ever more powerful black men.

Intersectionality in *July's People*

The novel explicitly deals with racial tensions of apartheid in South Africa. The Smales, who were once in a position of privilege, find themselves displaced and powerless in the rural setting. This highlights how race and class intersect to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. Their situation was critical due to displacement, as they could not find comfort in this new, haunting place. In contrast, Maureen's husband, Bam, has found ease in staying there with his servant. Gordimer writes:

Bam could help July mend such farming tools – scarcely called equipment – as he and his villagers owned... There was no bag of cement; but they worked together more or less as they did when Bam expected July to help him with the occasional building or repair jobs that had to be done to maintain a seven-roomed house and swimming pool. (*JP* 29-30)

It is visible that when Maureen moves into July's community, her inherent racism manifests itself. In the shifting condition (employer-employee) is something, Maureen cannot abandon. July serves as a temporary, physical safety net for her; it is never mental or emotional because he is their Black servant. It appears that the person who has been providing for their needs for more than a decade has suddenly become the most untrustworthy person. The author makes it clear that the Smales always remember to carry a gun for feeling of security and Maureen takes *The Betrothed* a novel. It was an unconscious gesture; it does allude to the sources of power for each of the two people. The book that was delivered is never read, much like the gun. Here, Gordimer is not implying reading for pleasure. She is implying reading to establish one's identity and space. She says about Maureen, "She was in another time, place, consciousness; it was pressed in upon her and filled her as someone's breath fills a balloon's shape." (*JP* 35)

The bakkie, a car, comes to represent the Smales' independence. Their reliance on July and the greater black community are reduced as long as they have it. Nevertheless, it becomes a question of disobedience when the latter gets hold of the keys and uses them somewhere without their consent. They realize how dependent they are on July. Without him, they could not last. However, with the time Maureen understands the equality and partnership. She tells him, "If I offended you if I hurt your dignity if what I thought was my friendliness, the feeling I had for you—if that hurt your feelings... I know I didn't know and I should have known." (87-88)

The power dynamics between the Smales and July are complex. July, a mere servant in the city, becomes the titleholder in the rural setting with local knowledge and power. Race and class have an impact on the change in the power dynamics, demonstrating how these groups are related. While *July's People* does not focus explicitly on gender issues, the novel touches on traditional gender roles. The Smales' relationships and functions within the family are challenged and transformed throughout the story, illustrating how gender intersects with other social categories.

In *July's People*, the realms of race – which is intimately related to class in South Africa – and gender intersect. Gordimer's choice to place a guy as the representative of the dark world and a female as the protagonist and antagonist in the (reverse) positions of protagonist and antagonist gives this novel its unusual urgency. This involves much more than the roles of "madam" and "boy" explored by other individuals. The whole set of social and moral relations invoked by Eldridge Cleaver in his book *Soul on Ice* as:

I know that the white man made the black woman the symbol of slavery and the white woman the symbol of freedom. Every time I embrace a black woman I'm embracing slavery, and when I put my arms around a white woman, well, I'm hugging freedom The myth of the strong black woman is the other side of the coin of the myth of the beautiful dumb blonde. The white man turned the white woman into a weak-minded, weak-bodied, delicate freak, a sex pot, and placed her on a pedestal; he turned the black woman into a strong self-reliant Amazon and deposited her in his kitchen. (160-62)

In their contemporary state of affairs, it is an ineffectual exercise. When Maureen can do nothing any longer about her appearance she sometimes realises the need to hide what she thinks to be her shame, “She felt his eyes upon her hands picking at her toes. She stretched her legs and tucked the hands out of the way under her armpits.” (*JP* 154) Meanwhile, as she starts to defy the white patriarchal ideal of the woman, there are times when she finds a strange new joy in laughingly showing off things that would have previously made her look bad in front of the other women of the society and she openly displays, “...yellow bruises and fine, purple-red ruptured blood-vessels of her thighs, the blue varicose ropes behind her knees...” (*JP* 111); and when she says about her breasts, “The baring of breasts was not an intimacy but a castration of his sexuality” (*JP*109) there is nothing sexual or provocative in her gesture, no casual nakedness that comes naturally within close relations contrary, in response to his patronising acknowledgement of her decline, followed by “Oh my poor thing,” (*JP* 109), echoed significantly, it is a deliberate act of denial aggression and a significant move towards a new kind of self and power.

The characters' cultural identities are determined by their racial circumstances, intersecting with their awareness and understanding. The Smales, as white South Africans, confront their preconceptions and biases as they navigate a vastly different cultural environment whereas the black women in *July's People* indeed fulfil the most menial of functions, serving in the fields, fetching and carrying, washing and cooking and cleaning (both for their own families and the whites in their midst), bearing children, submitting themselves to the comings and goings of their men, of their man, as they would to a force of nature.

Conclusion

To conclude, Nadine Gordimer's *July People* predates the formal articulation of 'intersectionality'. The novel provides a rich exploration of how various social categories intersect and shape the characters' experiences in the complex socio-political context of apartheid-era in South Africa. This novel tells the tale of Bamford and Maureen Smales' responses, adjustments, and survival to life in a black hamlet following their expulsion from their white middle-class area. On the one hand, Bam has an easier time, adjusting to his new existence with July's people than Maureen does. Since he can control his emotions and try to fit in the group instead of letting them control him. However, Maureen finds it difficult to cope with the situation's reversal, and spirals into madness, as a result she faces her inability to accept a life

devoid of a “superior” racial identity. She really cannot bear this change in her lifestyle and cannot function without the authority, control and comforts she used to have. Their relationship is on the verge of collapse due to Bam and Maureen’s drastically divergent responses and adjustments in life in July’s village. Therefore, the entire effect of this visionary narrative’s reversal of the colonial and racial power-play is scary, dismal and negative. Finally, it is evident that *July’s People* explores the broader political context of South Africa during the apartheid era. The characters’ national identity is deeply entwined with the political realities of the time, and their experiences reflect the intersection of individual lives with the broader socio-political landscape.

Abbreviations:

JP – *July’s People*

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