

**A Study of Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* from the perspectives of New
Historicism**

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Abstract- New historicism is a branch of cultural studies, which focus on reinterpreting literary texts within the social, cultural and political context of the period in which texts are produced. *July's People* (1981), is Nobel Prize winning novel by Nadine Gordimer. The novel deals with black liberation movement; who were segregated under the law of Apartheid in 1948, a conflict between black and white of South Africa. The narrator of the novel is Bamford Smale, who flees, with his wife and three children (all white people) to Johannesburg, the village of his servant July. They hide themselves in the hut of July. The novel posits history at the centre when black people of South Africa revolted against whites. It reveals a number of social, cultural, political milieu of that time. It is a discourse of many perspectives. The present paper is an attempt to see *July's People* through the lances of new historicist to analyse the testimonial socio-cultural structure and mindset of black and white people at that time. To do so the researcher will analyse the discourses of different perspectives in the novel along with a parallel study of other social documents.

Key worlds- New historicism, literary, non-literary, cultural, black liberation movement, discourse.

New historicism is a branch of cultural studies, emerged in 1980s. It covers a wide range of approaches to study literature within context of non-literary framework. To do so,

the new historicists do a parallel study of literary and non-literary texts of the same historical period. The term was coined by Stephen Greenblatt in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning; from More to Shakespeare* (1980), who took the idea from Michel Foucault's 'discursive practices'. The new historicists interpret literary texts within the social, cultural, political, psychological and intellectual milieu of that time when it was produced and show the shadow of their own time. It was reaction against old historicism which argued, "...that the literature of the period expressed the spirit of the age, which cantered on the idea of divine order, the chain of being, and the correspondences between earthly and heavenly existences." (191, Ramon Selden). New historicists argue that past is only a texturized form and it is "triple-processed' first through ideology, or outlook, or discursive practice of its own time, then through ours, and finally the trough the distorting web of language itself" (175, Berry). So new historicism is an another establishing of past with close reading of text and non-text. They argue that nothing can be produced social and political vacuum. Gordimer's *July People* (1981) is testimonial book of the history of South Africa, deals with different issues of that time: race, gender, psychological, sociological, cultural, political and language issues. Gordimer was South African writer, won Nobel Prize in 1991. In spite of her being white she raised voice against white and took active part in black liberation movement. She says in her interview, "whites among themselves are shaped by their particular position, just as blacks are by theirs. I write about their private selves; often even in the most private situation, they are what they are because their lives are regulated, and their mores are formed by political situations" (22-23). Like her own, the novel *July's People* is told from the prospective of a white, Bamford Smale. When the riots break out across the country, Bamford and his wife Maureen run away from Johannesburg with their three children Victor, Gina and Royce. July, their black servant, who is working for them for last 15 years helps them, brings them to his rural settlement, mud huts area. During that rush the family forgets many of their belongings although do bring the bakkie, a kind of truck and Bam's gun, which

become symbol of their power later. The family is forced to adjust themselves in primitive lifestyle of July's community and considers July as their master, they have lost the power, although July has same mind-set for them. Maureen still have superiority complex and mistrusts July, she does not want to give him the key of the bakkie. After a long time, the family members adjust themselves with July's family, Maureen works in the field and picks the wild green. Bam goes out for hunting with Daniel, he shows his bird rifle to Daniel, who learns how to use it. The chief of the village comes to know about the presence of white people in his area, he calls them. Accompanied by July, Bamford goes to meet the chief, he tells him about the current situation of the country, black people have revolted against their oppressors, bombed all big cities and broadcasts. The chief (in spite being black) does not like it, and wants to fight against those who are participating in this violence. when Bamford and Maureen reach in July's hut, discover that the gun is stolen, they firstly blame July but later come to know that Daniel has stolen it and gone to participate in black liberation movement. Maureen rebukes July wrongly blaming him. Time passes a helicopter flies over the community, people come out to see, Maureen runs towards its voice and the novel finishes. Gordimer's novel dwells upon a number of historical facts as mentioned above. For her contribution Robert Green writes, "Finally, when the history of Nationalist Governments from 1948 to the end comes to be written, Nadine Gordimer's shelf of novels will provide the future historian with all the evidence needed to access the price that has been paid" (156). Undoubtedly her writings reveal a plethora of fact full evidences, more then what historicists claim to know about. She makes a visual representation of history: the African black liberation movement. Head Dominic writes from her introduction to *selected stories* (1975) that, "she acts upon her society, while, in this relationship of mutual influence" (3). The novel, *July's People* is also a visual representation of Gordimer's own observation of marginalized communities and people survived in restless conditions. In addition to it, the book discloses the discourse of dominant whites and their display of power and discourse of

blacks: their submission and oppression. It is embedded with their prospectives of looking each other. It, basically, has its background on racism, slavery, oppression, exploitation of black by white people. There was Apartheid law, which segregated the blacks who have revolted against whites; many revolutions have already been accrued as the narrator says, “since the pass-burnings of the Fifties, since Sharpeville, since Soweto ’76, since Elsie’s River 1980, it seemed that all was quietening down again” (8). This apartheid law starts in 1948 and remains till 1990s. The first discourse of the novel is through the voice of Bamford, who is a white but favours black’s resistance and questions the chief who does not like this revolt, “you’ re not going to shoot your own people. You wouldn.t kill blacks. Mandela’s people...are you?” (73). Bamford does not want blacks to be killed by their own people. When Bamford and Maureen discuss July’s involvement in war as a freedom fighter, that time he calls it ‘holy war’, “July won’t fight any Holy Wars for that old man” (79). These traces are the verification for reader to know that a few white people might have disliked black people’s exploitation at that time. It was Gordimer’s own voice; which may be co-text for the novel, who opposed apartheid movement in South Africa. In her speech she says, “I to realize if I had been a child in that category- black- I might not have a writer at all, since the library that made this possible for me was not open to any black child” (Nobel Lecture). Bamford trusts his servant who is working for him since last fifteen years. But Bamford’s prospective gets changed when he realizes his deprivation of power and his dependency on July who has become his master authenticating Hegel’s ‘Dialectical Materialism.’ Once July gets the key of the bakkie and went for shopping, when he returns Bamford asks him in bitter words, “Bam didn’t greet him. ...Bam had not greeted him. ...-And where were you yesterday? What’s the story? -” (53). He scolds his son, Victor, thinking he has given him the key. He disliked the black people’s oppression by whites but his unconscious mind is possessed with the thoughts of his dominance over his servant. The stolen gun of Bamford represents the loss of power of the white people. Maureen has the same prospective for July,

her former status as a mistress has changed into new one, she adopts the primitive life, works in fields with village women. July's denial for her to go with village women shows he still considers her his mistress, but she has envy for July. She does not like to give the key of the bakkie to him, she complains her husband about July who keeps the key always with him when he calls master to Bamford she rebukes him saying, "*The master. Bam's not your master. Why do you pretend?*" (71). She reveals her outlook towards blacks when she reprimands July at the last of the novel again when she finds the Gun has been stolen, "You stole small things. Why? I wouldn't tell you then but I tell you now. My scissors like a bird, my old mother's knife-grinder" (152). Her quest for independence; for which she runs away without thinking of her family, shows the trauma of the loss of power.

Another historical context of the novel is the relation of blacks within themselves. The historians might not have pointed this significant perception, but Gordimer had acute awareness in depicting this striking issue through her novels. The chief of the village has his own prospective to see the blacks. He doesn't know about the anti-Soweto revolt by blacks. When July and Bamford's family visits him, he questions about White's presence in the village it is through that conversation he comes to know about black people's revolt against white, but his mind is so obsessed with white dominance that he criticises the revolution and wants to kill the blacks if they come in his area, "They give us guns, we going kill those people when they come with their guns" (121). The chief represents a mind washed slave who has nothing like a chief, as July says, "How can he fight? He is poor man. He is chief but poor man, he hasn't got money" (123). He boasts and favours white people.

July's role is ambiguous in the novel. He is a servant, working for Smales for last fifteen years. He brings the family in his hut, has devotion for them. He denies Maureen from doing works in the field, brings milk for Gina and wants to have same esteem for the family. But he was mistrusted by the Bamford and Maureen. Once he convinces them saying, "Your boy who work for you. There in town you are trusting your boy for fifteen years" (43). in the

whole novel he is urging the family to trust him. But the complex of 'dialectical materialism' dominates in the theme of the novel. On many ground July is charged for claiming himself powerful. The first occurrence is when he enters in the hut of Bamford and Maureen and doesn't say 'Sir', "You say I can come inside? -He used to have the habit of knocking at a door, asking, The master he say I can come in?, and they had tried to train him to drop the 'master' for the ubiquitously respectful 'sir'" (53). He wants to keep the key of the bakkie within himself when he is asked, "If they catch you, without a licence", he replies confidently and laughs, "Who's going to catch me? The white policeman is run away when the black soldiers come that time" (59). At the end of the novel when Maureen blames him, he replies her in his own language shows his new power and independence.

The social context of the novel reveals mainly about a marginalized village community of South Africa, where people live in mud huts, in distress, patriarchy dominated, women were considered inferior to men and work in fields, community considered white as their master, English language is unknown to them, apart from this explicit and conscious history; since new historicism focuses much about implicit and unconscious elements of texts, novel has implicit history of South Africa, that is, stance of black and white people, their insight to see each other. July, in spite of being a benefactor for them now, is obsessed with dominance of white. From his own prospective he always has reverences for the white family, "Your boy who work for you" (43). Likewise, the black chief doesn't like the presence of outsider blacks in his village. The white people use the chief as an apparatus to disseminate their power, he works like an agent for them. This shows, during the revolution period, unconsciously the government was favoured by black people and dominant ideologies are imposed on marginalized. In her Introduction of *Selected Stories*, she writes, "To change in the social attitudes unconsciously reflected in the stories represents both that of the people in my society, ... and my apprehension on it" (14). In the novel politics and power plays conspicuous role. There is a chain of hierarchy: white government, white residential of cities,

black chiefs of village communities, head man under a chief, male dominance over female. Gordimer minutely observes all aspects of society for her contribution. Clingman writes, “as much as she is an observer of the life around her, she is still a social participant in what she observes. If hers is history from inside, she is also confined by its inside position” (44).

The ‘language complex’ is one of the dominant concerns in the novel. Here Language implies power and resistance. July can speak only a broken English which Bam does not understand as stated, “Bam did not have this skill and often irritated him by a quick answer that made it clear, out of sheer misunderstanding, the Blackman’s English was too poor to speak his mind” (97). This is outlandish language to the other blacks even the chief is unknown to this language, “The chief had the sharp, ... but knew no white man’s language” (115). Gordimer’s use of language is unique in this novel, she switches her dialogues through the mouth of characters according to their position in society like: July usage broken English throughout the novel. The women of the village have strange gesture for Maureen; they observe her but do not utter a single word. The Linguistic plays most significant role at the last of the story when July answers her in his own language which Maureen, although does not know his native language, understands, “Suddenly he began to talk her in his own language, his face flickering powerfully. The heavy cadences surrounded her;...She understood although she knew no word. Understood everything” (152). Which reflects his frustration and release from the bondage of life.

To conclude, new historicism is an inclusive term, which assimilates all history (implicit and explicit). Since, *July’s People* set in historical context of anti-apartheid movement, it reproduces different dimensions of the movement, both implicitly and explicitly; consciously and unconsciously. The book is prophetic voice of Gordimer, whose spokesperson is a white, who represents multiple voice of whites. The book is narrated through different prospectives with their language differences. It deals with various aspects: the shift of power from dominant to subaltern, from Bamford to July, language power,

dissemination of power through agents, and the psychological outlook for others. Thus the novel is implanted in power resistance relationship of apartheid South Africa. It corroborates a prophetic voice against segregation system which was banned in 1994.

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