

**NOTHING IS BLACK AND WHITE IN SOUTH AFRICA:
POWER AND ROLES IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *JULY'S PEOPLE* AND J. M.
COETZEE'S *DISGRACE***

**NADA É PRETO E BRANCO NA ÁFRICA DO SUL:
PODER E PAPÉIS SOCIAIS EM *JULY'S PEOPLE*, DE NADINE GORDIMER, E
DISGRACE, DE J. M. COETZEE**

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RESUMO: O artigo a seguir é uma comparação entre dois romances escritos por sul-africanos vencedores do prêmio Nobel. Aparentemente, *O Povoal de July*, de Nadine Gordimer, e *Desonra*, de J M Coetzee, têm pouco em comum: o primeiro foi publicado em 1981, durante o Apartheid, e o segundo em 1999, após as primeiras eleições gerais do país; o primeiro conta a história de uma família que foge de sua casa em busca de segurança durante uma fictícia insurreição da população negra; o segundo narra a trajetória de um professor universitário. No entanto, argumento que, ao analisar seus protagonistas, os romances iluminam as relações de poder entre negros e brancos na África do Sul e a violência oriunda destas interações.

Palavras-chave: Apartheid, Gordimer, Coetzee.

ABSTRACT: The following paper is a comparison between two novels written by South-African Nobel Prize winners. Apparently, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and J M Coetzee's *Disgrace* have very little in common: the former was published in 1981, during the Apartheid; the latter in 1999, after the country's first general election; the former tells the story of a family fleeing their homes for safety during an entirely fictional uprising; the latter is about the downfall of a college professor. However, it is my contention that, by focusing on their main characters, both novels shed light on the power relations between black and white people in South Africa and the violence it brings about.

Keywords: Apartheid, Gordimer, Coetzee.

The following paper aims at analyzing two novels written by South-African Nobel Prize laureates. By comparing Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and focusing on their main characters and on the similarities of the narratives rather than on their differences, I want to draw attention to what is termed in *July's People* as "explosion of roles" (Gordimer 1982; 117) and show how, in these novels, the balance of power shifts, with white people gradually deprived of power and at the mercy of increasingly empowered black men, thus rendering dual categories, such as victim/perpetrator or right/wrong, insufficient to describe the place and the roles of the characters in South-African society. The characters to be approached are, in both novels, one black man, one white woman, and one white man: July, Maureen and Bam Smales in *July's People* and Petrus, Lucy and David Lurie in *Disgrace*. Two younger black men, Daniel in *July's People* and Pollux in *Disgrace*, shall also be mentioned for

their relation and association with the older, and more important, characters of July and Petrus.

Having already hinted at one aspect of the works that is to be left out, namely most of the other characters (including very relevant ones such as the Smales children), it is therefore proper to at least mention other points that do not belong to the subject matter of this discussion. The presence and relevance of animals, mostly dogs, in *Disgrace*, a noteworthy feature of the plot, is not to be approached. David Lurie's life prior to his arrival in the Eastern Cape, his dismissal from college in disgrace, and his sexual life shall be left out as well, though not entirely – his affair with the student Melanie is useful when discussing his role as possible victim and/or perpetrator. In *July's People*, the relationship between the Smales family and July's family and people, though certainly fruitful, is not within this paper's scope either. The purpose of this paper is to dwell on the power relations between the white couples (Bam and Maureen, David and Lucy) and the main black characters, July and Petrus.

Before comparing the similarities that I have pointed out as my primary focus, it may well be suited to acknowledge some of the differences between the novels. First of all, the plots of the novels unfold at different historical times and tell very different stories. Gordimer's work was published in 1981 and tells of an entirely fictional uprising, or maybe even a revolution, of the black population in South Africa. Although demonstrations and riots on the part of the black community were becoming more frequent in the late 1970's and early 1980's, principally with the hardening of the apartheid regime during P. W. Botha's government, no nationwide revolution with foreign support and ideological tones, fought with heavy artillery and approaching a full-scale civil war, as the one represented in *July's People*, ever took place. For instance, one of the landmarks in the struggle against apartheid, the Soweto uprising in 1976, had only (if I dare use such word) hundreds of casualties. It is not a matter of belittling the casualties; it is a realization that hundreds of casualties cannot be equated to a revolution that leads people to leave their homes afraid they may be targeted by air raids. Bam and Maureen, in a situation similar to a war's, try all the time to listen to the radio, to get the latest news, and find out what is happening elsewhere, for they are literally cut off from the rest of the country. Isolated in July's village, the couple feels that what is taking place is much more serious and profound than anything that has happened before, that their lives will hardly be the same again – the previous *status quo* will not be reestablished.

On the other hand, Coetzee's novel first appeared in 1999, seven years after the referendum that ended the apartheid system, and five years after the country had already had its first general election in 1994. In *Disgrace*, the segregational laws are clearly in the past; racism and white supremacy are neither legal nor upheld by any character. Moreover, in plain terms, *Disgrace* tells of a professor's ordeal and downfall, while *July's People* tells of the plight of a five-member family as they flee their home in search of safety in their servant's village. What begins to happen violently and suddenly in *July's People*, namely the end of the apartheid, is already in place in *Disgrace*. Gordimer's novel, as its epigraph makes clear, takes place during an interregnum; Coetzee's takes place after it. The "old", to use the epigraph again, is already dead in *Disgrace* and the "new" is already born.

The differences are obvious and undeniable – precisely what makes the

similarities more interesting and striking. Even though the “old” is dying in one and dead in the other, and even though the “new” cannot be born in one and is already born in the other, the main characters in both novels face what may be called a post-apartheid circumstance. In *Disgrace*, the legacy of the white oppression period is felt, still hovering over everybody's heads and somehow influencing their thoughts, acts, and responses. The characters always refer to the apartheid years, to what used to happen. The past cannot be left behind, cannot be simply erased or forgotten. In the other novel, Maureen and Bam are faced not with a post-apartheid South Africa, but with a surrounding that feels like it – their former lives have been shattered by the uprising for they, white people, are no longer in control, they no longer tell blacks what to do, what they are allowed to do or not, or how to behave – precisely what David, Lucy, and others go through in Coetzee's work. Neither David and Lucy nor Bam and Maureen order blacks; these white people have been deprived of their former power over the blacks for reasons of skin color alone. Therefore the characters in both novels live the same experiences when it comes to relate to each other in terms of race and power and are divided in exactly equal groups: a white man and a white woman before a black man.

The similarity between the two atmospheres, or circumstances, in the novels is made even clearer if we try to read some observations made about *Disgrace* as relating to *July's People* as well: in a review written when the novel was published, Andrew O'Hehir claims that, in the new South Africa, “brutal tyranny has been replaced by brutal anarchy” (O'Hehir 1999). Brutal anarchy is exactly what is displayed in *July's People*: airports closed, airplanes shot down, ports bombed, Red Cross appealing for blood, “white people chased away from their houses” (Gordimer 1982; 13), and the like. *July's People's* South Africa is more anarchical than *Disgrace's* – O'Hehir's claim is better suited for Gordimer's novel than for Coetzee's. In a *New York Times* review, it is stated that, in *Disgrace*, “all values are shifting in post-apartheid South Africa” (1999). But the present continuous tense applies more rightfully to *July's People* than to *Disgrace*: the former approaches the moment when the old values are beginning to crumble, while in the latter the values are supposed to have already shifted. The fact is that in both works the old *status quo* and previous balance of power no longer exist.

Paul Newman, in an article I shall return to, first warns that “reading *Disgrace* allegorically as a novel that captures the decline of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa must be done cautiously” (Newman 2005; 84). Needless to say that the same caution also must be applied to Gordimer's novel, which, in spite of several references to actual incidents, such as Sharpeville and Soweto, narrates an entirely fictional event. But Newman performs, with one novel, the same task I attempt here with two: to isolate some part, or parts, of the narrative in order to develop an argument without setting aside or neglecting the wholeness of the plot, without leaving out elements that might undermine one's thesis. However, if Newman's assessment that “Lurie's plight, and that of his daughter Lucy, who will remain in South Africa despite her ordeal, can be read as an examination of the place available for whiteness in this society” (84) is sound, the same may be said of Bam and Maureen's plight. They too, because of their ordeal, are characters in a fictional examination of the place available for whiteness once the values of former South African society start shifting; they are left without a place (both literal and metaphorically) and, in case the revolution succeeds, must, as white people, search

for a new place in society.

Now, in order to better illustrate the contentions herein advanced, I shall offer some more specific examples, extracted from the texts. The following remarks try to bring each pair of characters together, displaying their similar positions and roles in the novels.

Maureen Smales and Lucy Lurie, the two most relevant white female characters, are the ones whose similarity is more difficult to assert. Maureen is heterosexual, has three children, and married to Bam whereas Lucy is a lesbian, pregnant because of a rape, and daughter to Davie; Maureen is given voice throughout the narrative whereas Lucy's point of view is often denied to the reader for, as Newman points out, "this novel [*Disgrace*] does silence a number of voices, most notably, that belonging to the raped woman" (84). Maureen is July's boss whereas Lucy does not employ Petrus. Maureen suffers explicitly throughout the novel and becomes each time more afraid whereas Lucy recedes into herself – they respond differently to their ordeals. Whereas Maureen only finds out how humiliating "boy" was for July, how her consideration was condescending (Gordimer 1982; 98), after they have fled; Lucy, David ponders, who used to fly into a rage at the use of the word "boy", after the rape does not react (Coetzee 2000; 109).

However, they are both women who stop counting on white men for help – Maureen knows Bam is powerless and Lucy openly tells David that he should go because he is not helping in any way. It is necessary here to make something clear: the relationship between Bam and Maureen is not being viewed as equal to David and Lucy's; husband and wife cannot be equated to father and daughter. Nevertheless, in one sense, David is to Lucy what Bam is to Maureen: the closest white man, the closest person, the one to be relied upon, to be trusted, the person these women should or would resort to in case of trouble. But they do not: Maureen and Lucy seem to better understand the state of helplessness that white people are subjected to in these novels. Maureen looks at Bam and thinks: "what was he here, an architect lying on a bed in a mud hut, a man without a vehicle" (Gordimer 1982; 98) – she realizes his impotence. Lucy just wants to be left alone and turns down every offer or proposal forwarded by David and, at the end, seems to choose life in the Cape with Petrus – her father is incapable of seeing her through her ordeal.

Maureen's and Lucy's fates also look alike when it comes to their relations with the black man closest to them, July and Petrus, respectively. Maureen gradually loses all power over July: he stops doing anything that she asks, an unthinkable situation in the former *status quo*; he starts to question her and even to defy her, as in the car keys or the gun episodes; finally, he bluntly concludes that she makes "too much trouble" for him and that he does not want it anymore (Gordimer 1982; 151). Moreover, the black man starts telling her what to do. When he says to her that he must go see the chief, she says Bam can go. July replies that "you, master, your children. All is going" (Gordimer 1982; 101). He simply informs her of what they have to do. Ultimately, Maureen depends on July for practically everything: food, fuel, protection, and shelter. Lucy, unlike Maureen, does not lose her power over Petrus gradually – she has none since the beginning of the novel. The process is one of dependence: as the plot unfolds, as the events follow one another, she has no alternative but to give in for survival: she can either marry Petrus or risk losing the farm, and maybe even her life in another attack.

Without July and Petrus, these women can not live on. It is thus in one formulation, in one sentence, that Maureen and Lucy are more clearly brought together and resemble each other the most: they are white women who no longer trust and who cannot count on their closest white men and who have lost all authority or supremacy over their closest black men as they grow more dependent of them instead.

Pairing up Bam Smales and David Lurie seems an easier task: they are both graduated, cultured men, an architect and a college professor. They also respond in similar ways to the plight before them: unlike Lucy, who seems to come to terms with the new balance of power, Bam and David fight it, struggle against it, cannot bring themselves into accepting the situations they face – they become restless, irritable, as if the “profound helplessness” (Newman 2005; 84) that they feel as a result of the events was unacceptable. Note here that Newman’s formulation is intended for David only, though it does apply for Bam as well. Once again, for comparative reasons, one may resort to comments made about *Disgrace* and employ them for *July's People*: Newman argues that David Lurie has reached “a derogated state, if derogation is conceived as the lessening, weakening, curtailment or impairment of authority. Traditionally, such derogation has textually identified black subjects as suffering the psychological and corporeal damage inflicted by apartheid” (2005; 91). Bam, Maureen and Lucy also reach this derogated state: they have lost all former authority once granted by their skin color. These white characters suffer psychological and corporeal damage, brought about by the end of apartheid, or by its possibly temporary demise, in the case of *July's People*. They are raped, beat up, forced to flee their homes, deprived of food – ordeals usually reserved for blacks in South Africa.

Like Bam, “Lurie's authority as white, educated, wealthy and male is drastically curtailed, and his senses, and ability to make sense, are significantly impaired” (Newman 2005; 91). David does not know how to behave, what to do in order to help his daughter or to find a solution for the situation they face. Neither does Bam: he lacks the power to provide any means of survival for his family, having to rely entirely on his former servant. Bam and David experience unpredicted and previously unknown powerlessness as events take place. And both enter in conflict with the women: as their frustration increases, Bam and Maureen, like David and Lucy, start arguing and disagreeing more often. Bam tries to prove himself useful by going hunting or building a well; David sets the dog against the boy Pollux, tries to exert pressure over Petrus, reasons with Lucy’s neighbors – and all this to no effect. They change nothing and do not feel any better – they feel and, in practical terms actually are, useless.

Two other features of both novels illustrate the gradual loss of power on the part of the white characters: legal authority and physical objects that may symbolize power. In neither work can whites successfully resort to official authorities. In *July's People*, the only figure that may be viewed as a representative of authority is the chief the Smales family is told to visit: there are no policemen, soldiers, firemen or government officials. The state, the legal apparatus, it seems, has ceased to exist. In an ironic twist, after the gun is gone, Bam thinks that “if he couldn’t pick up the phone and call the police whom he and she had despised for their brutality and thuggery in the life back there, he did not know what else to do” (Gordimer 1982; 145). In *Disgrace*, the police do not help in any way – they even show themselves to be very incompetent by recovering a wrong war, not David’s. Lucy’s neighbors and friends are well aware of the

fact that the police will arrest nobody for the rape – only David nourishes some illusions, which are soon dispelled.

The elements that we may consider as symbolizing power are, in *July's People*, the car and the gun; and in *Disgrace*, David's car and Lucy's land. The whites end up losing them all – Lucy does not actually lose her land in the narrative but we are left with the impression that she eventually will for there is no alternative for her other than marrying Petrus. Moreover, the whites lose these things to the blacks – July unashamedly takes possession of the car and Daniel steals the gun; the black rapists take David's car and Petrus will take over Lucy's land. These objects come to represent the white's deprivation of freedom. In Gordimer's novel, the car stands for the Smales' freedom to move around and the gun offers some kind of protection. In Coetzee's, the car is not so important - though David feels "trapped on the farm without it" (Coetzee 2000; 139) - but the loss of the land implies Lucy's loss of freedom: she will "become part of his [Petrus'] establishment", she will "creep in under his wing" (Coetzee 2000; 203). The process of deprivation in both works is clear: the Smales lose their home, their jobs, their car, the value of their money, their gun, and, one might argue, they even lose their servant July. David loses his job, his reputation, his car, his relationship with his daughter is strained beyond recovery; Lucy loses her murdered dogs, will lose her land, and her freedom.

The process of white deprivation, of material things and of power, comes about coupled with another feature: it does not seem to be justified – these white characters are not particularly guilty of any act of racism or exploitation against the blacks. Whites become victims as blacks were under apartheid: blacks in South Africa used to be punished or to suffer only because of their skin color (not a justifiable reason), in the novels the whites suffer for no apparent reason as well. The Smales are against apartheid, they always voice their opposition and yet they must flee because of their skin color. Lucy, as already pointed out, raged at the word "boy", displays no racism and yet is brutally raped. David, in spite of some of Paul Newman's remarks that he is a "perpetrator of violence/wrongdoing and [...] predator" (Newman 2005; 91), cannot be simply labeled a racist or wrongdoer – he cannot be viewed solely as a negative figure. Although he shows to be somewhat uncomfortable with the new *status quo* -when suggested to give Petrus a hand, he remarks ironically that he likes "the historical piquancy" (Coetzee 2000; 77) – David also tells Lucy that she cannot "make up for the wrongs of the past" (Coetzee 2000; 133): no racist would consider the situation of the apartheid years as "wrongs". Similarly, when he attacks and sets the dog against Pollux, David thinks that "phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: teach him a lesson, Show him his place. So this is what it is like, he thinks! This is what it is like to be a savage" (Coetzee 2000; 206). He had avoided the phrases and if now they seem just and right it is because there has been a rape, and the phrases and the rage are savage, he ponders. And he feels ashamed (Coetzee 2000; 208). No racist would call himself a savage and feel ashamed.

Newman's refusal to call David a victim is wrong – he emphasizes the character's distance from a "victim position". He definitely is a victim of the attack on Lucy's farm: he is locked up, has his hair burned, is beaten up. The attack on the farm cannot be equated to David's affair with Melanie. The attack is brutal and cruel, the dogs are murdered in cold blood, Lucy is raped by three men, the car and the gun are

taken, David has fire set on himself. In the affair, “Melanie is passive throughout” (Coetzee 2000; 19), but it does not read like rape. In the second time they have sex, she says she does not want and David thinks “not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (Coetzee 2000; 25); and they have sex a third time (29). David does use his position as a teacher, does force himself on her but he does not rob her, does not assault her. And, guilty as he is, he is made to pay: he loses his job and his reputation. The men who rape Lucy get away with it. The arguments above are the reason why I have stated that dual categories are insufficient to describe the roles and places of the characters in the novels. David Lurie is both victim and wrongdoer. The Smales are victims of the uprising but have thrived on a comfortable life during a brutal regime of exploitation.

Having discussed the white characters and their process of deprivation of power, I now move to the black men July and Petrus. Unlike the whites, they do not seem to be deprived of anything as the narratives unfold – on the contrary, they gradually acquire, they are more and more possessed of material and abstract things. July’s process of empowerment can be seen through his use of the car: he first goes shopping with it without telling the Smales, he then starts to learn how to drive; finally, when they return from the visit to the chief, “Daniel sat up front, he and July were side by side again. When they walked to the settlement, July would have the keys of the vehicle back in his pocket” (Gordimer 1982; 123). It is as if the car gradually becomes his. In terms of possessions, Petrus also acquires tools and machines, becoming a farmer with more means.

In abstract terms, both July and Petrus show less and less respect for the whites. After the gun is gone, July admits to Maureen it was Daniel who took it but does not consider it “his business” (Gordimer 1982; 150). It is during this conversation that July makes his freedom and new power clear by saying that Maureen makes too much trouble and that he does not want it anymore (Gordimer 1982; 151). Petrus, in the beginning of the novel, already behaves freely: Lucy says he is co-proprietor (Coetzee 2000; 62) and “his own master” (114) but he calls himself “gardener and dog-man” (64) and seems to be “savouring the phrase” (64) – he knows he is more than that. In a revealing passage, David falls asleep in the house and awakes to find Petrus beside him, having a beer and watching soccer on TV, having turned the volume higher (Coetzee 2000; 75). Petrus does not care if David is bothered by the TV and cheers freely. However, both are rather unassuming – they are neither arrogant nor snobbish. They display a certain detachment – July starts to not care, and Petrus does not care since the beginning, for the fortunes of the white people around them. Aware of their newly acquired power, they know the whites need them, not the other way around. July can choose whether or not to keep on helping the Smales; Petrus can choose whether or not to marry Lucy, to protect her. The Smales, David and Lucy, have no choice: where can Ban, Maureen, and Lucy go to? What else can David do besides offering money for Lucy to leave? He cannot solve the problem, only Petrus can.

Another feature that approximates July and Petrus is that both have younger, more somber “followers”: Daniel and Pollux. In spite of these young men wrongdoings – Daniel steals the gun and Pollux takes part in the rape – neither July nor Petrus are willing to intervene in favor of the whites, for they know Bam, Maureen, David, and Lucy can do nothing against them, and, as previously stated, they do not care. One

difference between these two black characters may rest in the fact that Petrus looks and behaves in a way that seems more mischievous and devious than July's but both enjoy their new situation as people with power – Petrus “savors” calling himself dog-man. Petrus may be seen as July's future, the man July will or may eventually become once his new role as empowered man is strengthened or solidified. As Petrus lives a post-apartheid circumstance and July inhabits the interregnum, the former is more confident and self-assured than the latter. However, O'Hehir's observation that “their [David and Lucy's] relations with Petrus, the African farmer who is their nearest neighbor, become increasingly troubled and ambiguous” (O'Hehir 1999) applies to Maureen and Bam as well. It is a troubled relation because July stops caring; and ambiguous because he can no longer be viewed as servant only – the whites depend on him instead. July stops being dependable as the Smales become dependant.

Dual categories do not apply for the black characters either. July truly tries to help the Smales in the beginning; he does not mean their harm. Petrus and Lucy seem to have had a good business relation; the black man actually helps her on the farm. Neither master nor servant applies as label for these black men. They do not do anything explicitly harmful against the whites – though Petrus involvement in or knowledge of the rape is unclear. They are not like the white wrongdoers of the apartheid years, upholders of race supremacy and exploiters of the blacks. The roles are not simply inverted: the whites do not become victims alone as the blacks become wrongdoers alone. The situation is not so clear-cut. The “explosion of roles” creates more complex interactions and positions.

Eighteen years separate these two novels and yet the circumstance is the same: white people at the mercy of the blacks, having to rely entirely on them if they are to escape their predicament. White people whole dependant of black men. Black men enjoying newly acquired power and freedom of choice. Neither side entirely innocent nor entirely guilty, but still divided in two opposite sides. Not in open confrontation as during the apartheid but not in harmony either. Gordimer's and Coetzee's novels refrain from providing us a black and white picture, with easy solutions and easy definitions. The only clearly black or white feature in the novels is the color of the skin of the characters. According to what we encounter in *July's People* and *Disgrace*, there are no simple answers for the ordeal of South Africans - be them black and white. Once the loathsome regime of apartheid ends, all South Africans, black and white alike, must struggle, at times in open confrontation, to find their roles and positions in the new society.

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