

Interregnum: a
struggle between the
past and the present
in 'july's people'



The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms. (Gramsci 276)

This is the epigraph of the novel *July's People* based on which Nadine Gordimer prophesies the chaotic situation that South Africa will undergo in future. The text to which this sentence belongs to is the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* which was written in 1930. “

Interregnum” is a recurrent theme in most of Gordimer's writings in the post-apartheid years. Interregnum means the period in which the country does not have a leader. Gordimer presents the period of transition between the end of the rule of the Whites and the beginning of rule of the Blacks as Interregnum in her novel *July's People*. Both Gramsci and Gordimer view nation as struggling between the dying old and the new which cannot take its birth. Gordimer sets her novel in a dystopian future in order to show the disastrous consequences that the country would face if the economic exploitation of Africans and the political hegemony of Afrikaners under the system of Apartheid continue uninterrupted.

The novel opens with a person asking whether they would like to have some cup of tea. The first line of the novel, spoken in broken English, racially marks the entry of the servant of Smalese, July. The narrative continues as July bending at the doorway and beginning that day for them as “ his kind has always done for their kind” (1), the routine that used to happen in their urban house takes place in a refugee hut now with a noticeable change. The motif behind his “ bent” stance is uncertain whether it is of the same master-servant respect that he has for them or because of the “ aperture” through which he enters. The phrases that seemed routine now connotes something

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different to the reader. For instance, the phrase “ knock on the door” signifies the anxiety that one would experience especially when one is hiding and not the once comforting sign of the servant bringing morning tea. The Smales are now hiding and anxious that they might get caught by the Black revolutionaries. The absence of the knock on the door and July’s entry into the mud house that has no doors juxtaposes the past that is the dying old regime and puts the Smales family in the present that is uncertain and ever fearful. Here the narrative disrupts the scene of morning tea by repeating the encounter in an entirely different context. Thus the White family’s rule that July should always knock the door and enter becomes invalid here in this mud house. The transformation of the master-servant relationship into the relationship of host-guest is seen here. Gordimer makes it obvious when Maureen says that they can cook for themselves by making a remark that “ the guest protesting at giving trouble” (12). This constant tension between the past and the present and the throes of their rural life echoes throughout the novel. July wakes them up with a tea tray in hand that contains two pink glass cups which was once gifted to Martha, July’s wife, by Maureen. These two pink glass cups are anachronistic as these are the symbols of the past regime and remind the characters of their bygone power. Maureen is found struggling to wake up from the sleep. “ Bam, I’m stifling; her voice raising him from the dead, he staggering up from his exhausted sleep” (1). The emphasis of these words asserts the epigraph of the novel clearly as Bam and Maureen are struggling between life and death. One is struggling to rise from it whereas the other is suffocating.

In July's People, one can see a chronic state of uprising all over the country and the Whites, running for their lives. The Black revolutionaries begin to protest everywhere and the banks and other public buildings are under threat. In the beginning of the novel, Bam and Maureen are found struggling to withdraw their savings from the bank account. The shopping malls are gunned down, the airports are burnt and the White people are being killed at their own homes. The city shows no signs of being 'contained' and the Smaleses have to make a quick decision which finally falls into the hands of their servant. When July's mother questions about the arrival of the Smaleses, July replies that their people are burning the houses of the Whites and they are also equipped with the modern machines and guns. This shows the beginning of the process of decolonisation. July says, " Everywhere is the same. They are chasing the whites out. The whites are fighting them. All those towns are the same. Where could he run with his family? His friends are also running. If he tried to go to a friend in another town, the friend wouldn't be there" (24). Despite talking about the revolution in the novel, it talks about the effect that the revolution has on the White family. All that the reader and the main characters get to know about the revolution is only through the report of the radio news. The main focus is on the power relations of the society which proves to be hollow, impractical. A kind of deterritorialization takes place that eventually makes the White family to flee from their hometown to safeguard themselves. Ultimately they seek refuge in the hands of their servant July who becomes the " Saviour" of their life: " He turned to be the chosen one in whose hands their lives were to be held; frog prince, saviour, July" (11). The title of the novel July's People says that they are his people. They become his possession. The Whites, who once

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owned slaves, are now possessed by their servant. The reversal of power relations takes place which gives us a glimpse into a chasm of hatred and misunderstanding that later develops between the Blacks and the Whites, the master and the servant, the host and the guest. Bam and Maureen Smales hide in their own "bakkie" and travel for almost three days and nights along with their three children and their faithful servant, July. Their hard journey can be seen as a shift from the dying old regime to the approaching new social order that is full of difficulties. Their lifestyle turns from a comfortable urban life to sleeping on the floor of the vehicle. For many years, the Black natives were deprived of their own land but now the situation is reversed. Their helplessness in their own house makes the Whites depend on their servant's decision. When July tells them that he told everyone that it is his own vehicle, Bam and Maureen cannot accept it. Yet they cannot do anything about it. They have to accept his decision since they are under his shelter. The Black South African poet Mongane Wally Serote wrote, in one of his poems, that the Blacks must learn to talk and the Whites must learn to listen. This is what takes place in the novel *July's People* in a very tactful manner. The Smaleses are now made to learn to listen and watch the prevailing circumstance with a ghastly face. When July tells his wife and mother about the presence of Smales, they are not welcomed by both of them. His mother answers that White people must have their own people and they are living everywhere in this world. The South African Whites are not certain whether they have a future in South Africa which is turning out to be a revolutionary country. The Black revolutionaries in the novel and the Soweto uprising are the best examples for this transition. Everyday change at the social and cultural level can be observed

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in the novel through the simple, domestic chores that Smaleses wish to do. When Maureen wants to wash the few clothes that they have brought, July insists that his women will do that work. She is unable to win over his argument and therefore she thinks of paying them money. But then she realises that money is just a bits of paper and will be of no use here. " She saw how when she or Bam, who were completely dependent on these people, had nothing but bits of paper to give them, not even clothes -so prized by the poor -to spare..."(33). The cultural changes become more visible when it mainly concerns the children of the Smaleses. Gina, their daughter, soon learns the way the Black children live. She befriends a Black girl named Nyiko and even learns her language. She copies her behaviour and easily adapts to the new surroundings. Maureen and Bam are taken aback when they saw their daughter carrying a Black child at her back and pretending to be a responsible person. Victor, even the young boy, soon accustoms to this culture towards the end of the novel. When July gives him a length of fishing line, he takes it with a gesture of black obeisance and gratitude with " cupped palms" (191). According to Gramsci, the dominating power in society is culture rather than political and economical aspects. He is well-known for developing the concept of " Cultural Hegemony". He states that the dominant ideology of the ruling class influences the ideology of the entire society. So far the ideology that was set up by the Whites dominated the South African society. This role of dominance is reversed in the novel July's People. The rulers become the ruled and ultimately, the reversal of the cultural domination takes place. The children of the Smaleses are soon able to adapt to the new structure whereas the parents find it difficult to follow because they are in a way too old to denounce their old customs and adapt a

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new order. Therefore, it is mainly in their children that the novel's hope for the cultural change is vested upon. Bam and Maureen are unable to stop their children from learning the ways the Black people live. All that they both can think about in this situation is that they are lucky to be alive. Another reminder about the past comes through rain. When it rains for the first time in July's village since their arrival, Maureen wets herself in the rain. The whole action reminds the readers of the old regime when she takes shower in the bathroom. Her 'turn' can be taken as a turn towards her 'past'. She becomes a part of that landscape. She imagines the rain to be a 'shower faucet' and looks out of the 'window'. Her actions are out of place and time since there are neither windows nor shower faucets in July's village. Then she sees a reflection of a light source and assumes it to be of the reflection of a candle flame coming out of the window-pane. But, in reality, it is the reflection of the light source of the vehicle, the "bakkie", driven by July and Daniel. The fact that July took the vehicle without permission and his entry when Maureen takes bath in the rain signifies the old regime that is dying. July's entry brings her back to the present and shows Maureen's inescapability in this changing environment. The difficulty in reading during the interregnum is something that Maureen struggles to overcome. In the earlier part of the novel, she tries to read the translation of Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*. But what will happen if she reads it is the question that arises in her mind. Nothing is going to change after reading the novel. Therefore the narrator says that if she did not read the book now, they would find the solution soon. If she did read it, they would still be here in this interregnum even when the book was finished. "But the transport of a novel, the false awareness of being within another time, place and life that was the

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pleasure of reading, for her, was not possible. She was in another time, place, consciousness" (34). The emphasis in ' was' shows that she was in her big house with a different lifestyle altogether in the city. But now the reality is different and she feels that she is already in another place, another time and her consciousness is constantly pressed upon her. Maureen's 'Unreadability' shows her anxiety that this interim period would never come to an end and that she has to endure this forever. " No fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know, could not have imagined or discovered through imagination" (35). The Smaleses have nothing. There is nothing in their mud houses. They cannot expect anything other than being alive. Maureen's incapability of reading therefore can be seen as one of the ' morbid symptoms' of the interregnum which Gramsci talks about. Maureen recalls her childhood when she would return home along with her Black servant Lydia. Lydia would carry her school bag on her head. One day a photographer wished to take a picture of them which later appears with the images of South African policy of apartheid in the book titled Life. Maureen did not understand it then as she could not relate to the people who are helping her now. The tension arises when July takes the keys of the " bakkie" without the knowledge of the Smaleses. Bam and Maureen cannot digest the fact that July wants to drive their " bakkie". Even when he enters, the usual ' knock at the door' is missing and the word ' master' is dropped. It is uncertain whether July dropped it consciously or unconsciously. When July expresses that he is learning to drive for the purpose of buying things for the Whites' family, Bam expresses in a surprised manner: " I would never have thought he would do something like that. He's always been so correct. – never gave any quarter, never took any, either. A balance. In spite of all the

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inequalities..." (71). They claim themselves to be White liberals and people who believe in equality. But their restlessness, when July drove the vehicle, shows that they cannot see him as their 'equal'. When July was a servant back there, he has always been correct. But now they are distressed by his action. At one point, Maureen and July even develop a clash of words with each other. July lists out the kind of unnecessary tasks that he used to do in her house. The constant interaction between the past and the failure to cope with the present keeps recurring in the novel. She realises that her own view of being a tolerant, humane and a non-racist woman has been false. When Maureen accuses him of stealing the gun, July talks to her in his language angrily but Maureen is able to understand although she knew no word. For the first time, he shows his anger towards his employer. This evidently shows the break in the master-servant relationship and July, speaking to her in his language, shows himself as gaining authority over her. "She understood although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him" (185-86). The Whites have been dominant ever since they established their colonies in South Africa. But now the authorities of power are in oscillation and the Smaleses are under the custody of their servant. The chief of the village wants to meet the Smales' family where Maureen realises that her previous position of power defined by the society no longer exists here. Andre Brink, a South African novelist and critic, observes that a shift in the lexicon brings out the transformation from the past regime to the present in the novel July's People. He sees that the explosion of roles also involves an explosion of language. When July and the Smaleses go to the chief's house, Maureen is the one who discovers this 'explosion of roles' and <https://assignbuster.com/interregnum-a-struggle-between-the-past-and-the-present-in-julys-people/>

announces the central concern of the novel July's People to the readers. " Us and them. What he's really asking about: an explosion of roles, that's what the blowing up of the Union Buildings and the burning of master bedrooms is" (142). Language is a very important means of communication among human beings. It plays an important role in our day-to-day life and helps us to understand each other clearly. It is used as a tool to communicate ideas, beliefs and emotions.

Language in July's People plays a significant role which also contributes to the change in authority. Maureen has the habit of speaking in simple language to July so that he will be able to comprehend what she says. But the situation is reversed in his village. Bam and Maureen are unable to understand the language spoken by the people of the village. They are secluded from the others in the village. When July's wife and his mother speak in their native language, Maureen is unable to grasp what they say. His mother pities the plight of the White woman. She calls Maureen a " poor thing", " the nhwanyana" (160). July is the only person who serves as the mediator between the Smaleses and other people in the village. When Maureen and July argue with each other for the keys of the " bakkie", Maureen no longer tries to simplify the words for July to understand. She uses the word ' dignity' in front of him and wonders whether he understood or not. The language, that is used to remove the communication barrier, creates barrier between them. The failure of language and the inability to communicate during the period of interregnum leads to further misunderstandings in the novel: ... she didn't know, either, if he understood the words; she dropped fifteen years of the habit of translation into very

simple, concrete vocabulary. If she had never before used the word 'dignity' to him it was not because she didn't think he understood the concept, didn't have any - it was only the term itself that might be beyond his grasp of the language. (88) The superiority that July feels over the Smaleses can be seen when they go to meet the chief of the village. When the headman questions Bam about his arrival, Bam asks July who he is and what he does here. The narrator describes July as a mentor or guide to the Smaleses. They need him to translate what the chief says. Most often, the chief speaks in his native language which makes Bam and Maureen get excluded from the conversation. July becomes the main person to whom they address the issue: "It seemed always to amuse July to be the mentor, as if he didn't take seriously a white's wish to comprehend or faculty of comprehension for what he had never needed to know as a black had the necessity to understand, take on, the white people's laws and ways" (136). Towards the end of the novel, Maureen hears the sound of the helicopter and runs towards it. She runs either hoping for the better future with a confident embrace or escapes from the future: The smell of boiled potatoes (from a vine indistinguishable to her from others) promises a kitchen, a house just the other side of the next tree. There are patches where airy knob-thorn trees stand free of undergrowth and the grass and orderly clumps of Barberton daisies and drifts of nemesia belong to the artful nature of a public park. She runs trusting herself with all the suppressed trust of a lifetime, alert, like a solitary animal.... (195) Many critics interpret this last action of Maureen in a different ways. According to Susan Pearsall, a well-known critic of Gordimer's novels, it is the act of betrayal that might liberate the mother from

complicity and bad faith. She runs towards the helicopter leaving her family behind. What it reveals is her total inability to live in the present.

One could see the collapse of both White military power as well as the White moral power which is depicted through the change in characters at the end of the novel. The interregnum the novel examines is double-faced. It analyses the current tensions of the past regime as well as the promising future that may break the chains of the apartheid regime.