



Postcolonial Ambivalence And The Emergence Of A New Future: Analyzing Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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Abstract

The present research paper employs the theoretical frameworks of ambivalence and hybridity to analyze Nadine Gordimer's novel *July's People*. The paper investigates the manifestation of ambivalence in the primary characters and setting of the novel, exploring how the simultaneous existence of opposing feelings impacts their internal and external conflicts, leading to a sense of disunity. Moreover, the paper focuses on the ambivalent position of white individuals and their role in shaping the emergence of a new future in South Africa. Through a scholarly lens, this study delves into the complex interplay of ambivalence, loss of identity, and the formation of a hybrid culture, shedding light on the transformative potential of ambivalence in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Ambivalence, Simultaneously Opposed Feelings, Loss of Identity, Hybrid Culture, and New Future.

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Introduction

Ambivalence is a state of having simultaneously held opposed feelings or emotions towards some object or person or in part related to expectations about how individuals should act in a particular situation. In such experience, an attitude with both positive and negative components is developed that make the person uncertain or indecisive. A person held with ambivalent feelings tends to develop a less degree of attitude- relevant behavior and hence their actions are less predictable. Such people tend to be persuaded by attitude- relevant information than less ambivalent.

In his book, *The Ego and the Id*, Sigmund Freud explores the role of ambivalence in human behavior and relationships thus: “. . . where such ambivalence exists we can say that love and hatred are mixed together in varying proportions, so that the one exhibits itself sometimes more and sometimes less strongly than the other” (34). In this context, ambivalence is seen as a natural and inevitable part of the human experience, arising from conflicting desires and impulses that can be difficult to reconcile. Edward Said, in his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, observes, “Ambivalence is a response to situations in which one is caught between two or more opposing forces, and reflects the tension between conflicting desires, loyalties and identities” (96). In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said examines the relationship between power dynamics, colonialism, and culture. He argues that individuals within colonized societies often experience ambivalent feelings towards their oppressors, such as a simultaneous mixture of anger and attraction. This ambivalence is not a simple binary of resistance versus compliance but a complex and nuanced response to oppressive structures.

Forms of Ambivalence

Unforgettable ambivalence or Cognitive Dissonance found in an individual can lead to avoidance, procrastination or deliberate attempts to resolve the ambivalence. When the final decision has to be made, the person may experience the greatest discomfort

because of his ambivalence that differs according to varying degrees. Psychologist Leon Festinger, in his book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, explains the concept of “unforgettable ambivalence” thus:““ Unforgettable ambivalence, also known as cognitive dissonance, refers to the state of psychological tension that arises when a person holds contradictory beliefs, attitudes, or values” (57).

Felt ambivalence is a psychological experience, subjectively experienced by an individual as a state of conflict with mixed feelings about a particular stimulus. Objective ambivalence or potential ambivalence represents the simultaneous acknowledgement of both positive and negative evaluations regarding a particular stimulus. James J.Gross and Ross A.Thompson, in their book, *Emotion regulation: Conceptual foundations* (2007), define felt ambivalence as, “Felt ambivalence refers to the experience of conflicting emotions or mixed feelings about a specific stimulus or situation, often characterized by a sense of uncertainty or indecisiveness” (21).

Critical theorists have explored the concept of ambivalence in relation to issues of power and oppression where the marginalized groups experience ambivalent feelings towards their oppressors such as feelings of both anger and attraction towards those in positions of power. In this context, ambivalence is seen as a complex and nuanced response to oppressive structures rather than a simple binary of resistance versus compliance.

Simultaneous Feelings

The simultaneous feelings of ambivalence are felt both by the colonizer and colonized. Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian Philosopher, in his book, *Critique Of BlackReason*, argues that ambivalence is a key feature of colonial power as it allows for simultaneous exercise of both violence and care towards the colonized (86).Homi Bhabha , the prominent post-colonial theorist, argues that colonialism creates a sense of ambivalence among both the colonizer and the colonized,

as they grapple with the complex and contradictory realities of colonial power relations. In his view, the colonial encounter produces a sense of ambivalence that is central to the post-colonial condition.

Frantz Fanon, the Martinican Psychiatrist and post-colonial theorist, who explores the psychological effects of colonialism on colonial populations in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, argues that the experience of colonialism produces a sense of ambivalence among the colonized populations who simultaneously desire and resent the power and privilege of the colonizers (75).

Cesaire critiques that colonialism produces a sense of ambivalence among the colonized population who are torn between their desire for liberation and their fear of the unknown. Mohanty, the feminist scholar, brings in a feministic perspective to this idea. She analyzes how gender interacts with colonial power relations and argues that women in colonized societies often experience ambivalence towards their colonizers as they simultaneously desire and fear the material benefits that colonialism can bring such as education and economic opportunities.

Colonial Identity

While identifying the complex nature of ambivalence that involves “recognition of and resistance to” colonial authority, Homi Bhaba stresses that ambivalence is “the space in which colonial identity is both articulated and contested” (64). Moreover, the simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion are provoked by the “Hybridity” and “Mimicry” of the colonized subjects.

“Hybridity”, as understood from Edward Said’s work, describes the emergence of new cultural form from multi-culturalism. Homi Bhaba observes, “Ambivalence is the condition of the disavowed subjectivity that represents the colonial difference and it is this interstitial passage between colliding cultures that defines the moment of hybridity” (66). The ambivalent emotions of attraction and repulsion challenge the supposed authority and purity of colonial discourse for the “racial

or cultural purity collapses when it encounters the half-caste, the hybrid or the mimic man” and hence it becomes the site of a “doubling articulation” (68). This duality creates a split in the identity of the colonized who become the hybrid of their own cultural identity and the colonizer’s cultural identity.

“Mimicry” occurs when members of a colonized society imitate and take on the culture of the organizers. Colonial Mimicry comes from the colonists’ desire for a reformed, recognizable Other as a subject of difference that is, as Bhaba writes, ‘almost the same, but not quite’. Thus Mimicry becomes a sign of a double articulation, a strategy which appropriates the Other as it visualizes power. Jacques Lacan asserts, “the effect of mimicry is camouflage.... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled” (78). Moreover, Mimicry gives a partial presence for the ‘colonial’ for he is dependent for his representation within the authoritative discourse itself. The colonists desire to emerge as authentic through mimicry by the process of writing and representation. Thus Bhaba sees Mimicry as a ‘double vision’ that disrupts the authority while disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse.

Moreover, ambivalence, the complex and multifaceted phenomenon, manifests the uneasy relationship between the colonized and colonizer by reflecting their struggle to reconcile the past values of colonialism with the demands of the present. Ania Lamba considers it as a “form of cultural negotiation”(130), as it allows individuals and communities to engage with their colonial past while simultaneously asserting their own identities and values. They tend to forge new post colonial identities that are highly complex and contrary in the present situation..

Analysis

As a ‘writer with deep and passionate commitment to struggle for a better South Africa and a better world’, (Pahad ‘Thinker’

9), Gordimer presents the moral and psychological tensions of her racially-divided home country, by exploring the black and white characters within the framework of racial prejudice. She concentrates on the relationship between individuals and society, society and history by tracking their individual lives. Michito Kakutani rightly observes that that Gordimer's concern is 'not with the ideology but with the ambiguous consequences of ideology on the lives of individual women and men' (*New York Times*, Oct14, 1991-2). Gordimer's characters are sensitive, civilized men and women because for them 'racism is not an abstract political issue but a fact of daily existence, met on ultimate and personal terms' (2).

In 'July's People', Gordimer examines the ambivalent position of the South African white 'liberals' and attempts to foresee their dystopian fate by presenting the portrayal of a white liberal family and their failure especially of the wife Maureen to adapt to post-South African situation.

Simultaneous Feelings- Fear and Attraction

When *July's People* begins, the war has already started against the whites. Bam and Maureen Smales, the white suburbanites, who enjoy their privileged life in Johannesburg, have an ambivalent thought about their life in South Africa. While Bam wants to move away from South Africa and settle in Canada, Maureen who was brought up in the Western Area Gold Mines, likes to stay in South Africa whatever the consequences may be. They have simultaneous feelings of fear and attraction towards their position in South Africa. Though they "feel threatened at the appalling thought that they had lived out their whole lives as born pariah dogs in a black continent" (*July's People* 8), they take a bold decision by considering "this and nowhere else was home" and continue to stay in Africa.

Ambivalence and Conflict

The Smales develop ambivalent feelings that lead them to conflicts both mental and physical when they are exposed to an alien

community. When their servant July offers to help them, they along with their children, move to his veld situated 600 kilometres away in a bakkie. July, who has been serving them for fifteen years, becomes their master and thus their roles get reversed. The Smales face the cultural shock when stay in July's hut for their sophisticated life was replaced by the bush life of July's village. They are forced to abdicate the glimmers of 'civilized life' and experience everything anew from the other end. They depend on July for food, shelter and medicine.

The cultural conflict is further triggered by reversal of master and servant roles. July, their present master undergoes a change in his behavior that he takes away their bakkie and intends to retain it as his own. He is also strengthened by the thought that the blacks are gradually gaining ground and the whites cannot do anything to suppress their rebellion. The Smales feel angry, threatened, insecure and offended but they cannot quarrel with July. They think "Lucky to be alive. Neither could expect the other to say what would come next, what to do next, not yet" (55).

Simultaneous Feelings- Past and Present

Though the Smales adjust themselves to their new relationships, they feel difficult to forget their old habits, reflexes and assumptions. They cannot suppress their shock they experience with the new realities and gradually they lose their sense of their past. When Bam's gun is stolen by Daniel, the white family has lost its last fragment of their normal life. The disappearance of his only weapon completely unmans Bam.

In course of time, Bam settles down to do his routine work by hunting piglets with the gun and by making water tank in his place. Even the children start following the primitive African life. Gradually all the traces of modernism fade away from their lives. Their civilized modern life becomes a dream and primitivism becomes their real life.

Maureen tries her level best to adapt to the new condition of life. In the beginning, she

insists on using toilet paper, malaria pills but gradually changes herself. She does not even mind even if her children wash in the river though there is a chance of being affected by Bilharzia infection. She attempts to communicate with Martha, July's wife, though there is a barrier of language. She works with her in the fields and thus she makes an attempt to accept the present. When July takes away the key of the bakkie, Maureen cannot insist to give back those keys and that makes her feel that 'they were his creatures like cattles and pigs'(98). After her confrontation with July, she is afraid of a man for the first time in her life.

Later, Maureen is left in ambivalence with her conflicting feelings of past and present. She understands the absurdity of her situation in a new environment that she has nothing of her own. So she runs foolishly towards the helicopter which has landed near the veld. Leaving behind the fears, hopes, children, family, she runs towards the past. As M A Quayum observes,

However, her soul-searching instead of easing things, only complicates them by revealing an inverted image of herself to her and her absurdity of her situation in the new environment (47).

Simultaneous Feelings- Care and Control

The 'role-playing' nature of the South African white liberals represented by Maureen, in this novel adds to the sense of ambivalence. The South African whites maintain hypocrisy in their outlook and relationship with the blacks and they fail to adapt themselves to black culture because of their lack of the spirit of sacrifice.

Maureen brings out, as in Stephen Clingman's words, "the ironies and betrayals of the white liberal commitment' (*The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 95) that she practises a complex and contradictory relationship with her colonized servant. She is 'kind' and 'humane' to her black servant July who works for her for fifteen years. She does

everything to prove that she is free from the feeling of apartheid and white arrogance.

Decently paid and contented male-servant, living in their yard since they had married, clothed by them in two sets of uniforms kakki pants for rough house work, white drill for waiting at table, given Wednesday and alternate Sunday free, allowed to have his town woman sleep with him in this room (*July's People* 9)

She sends gifts to his wife and entrusted him with the house keys. She urges him to drop the word 'master' for it affects their liberal ethos. Thus she does her utmost to 'slough privilege'(8) and make July her 'equal' by attributing him 'dignity' and 'friendly' status in their master-servant relationship. M.A.Quayum rightly observes the mind of Maureen:

But in her complacency, delusion and circumscribed vision, what she failed to realize was that her best was not good enough, her sense of dignity was distorted and her attempts to slough privilege were put on ("Gordimer's Radical Critique of White Liberal Attitude, 48)

He states that Maureen has not understood the fact that making concessions and conferring 'dignity' are two different things. Being lenient is not the same as treating one as an equal for the latter involves honour, mutual respect and appreciation of another's values. On the contrary, Maureen is never really-interested in the genuine equality of July but just playing an 'equal opportunity' game with him. She cannot fathom that her intention to confer 'friendly' status on July 'should incorporate the possibility of July's freedom or her swapping roles with him and putting himself in his shoes'(48).

Maureen, in her munificence, acts as a 'giver' and makes July as a 'receiver' so that he can depend on his mistress morally and financially. She never tries to discover the

true identity of July which she comes to know only during her meeting with the village Chief that July is actually Mwawate. On the contrary, she is happy to remember him as 'her idea of him' and treats July as 'an abstraction rather than a real person' (Quayum 49).

Maureen begins to realize her hypocrisy and pretentiousness when her family takes refuge in July's village. As she can not forget the past, the symbols of the past life-bakkie and gun-, become a fixation in her mind. She cannot mingle with the blacks like her husband Bam but rather recedes into her 'interior' and increases her distance with the people around her. She has three confrontations with July and that bring down her liberal mask. When July takes the key of the bakkie, Maureen realizes that her attempts to treat him as an 'equal' are an impersonation. When she charges July for the theft of gun, it marks the end of their pseudo-intimacy. When July rediscovers his freedom, Maureen recognizes the falsity of her position and the dubiousness of her liberal values that she had cherished so far. She proves herself to be a typical liberal white employer by accusing her servant for dishonesty and in fact she discovers herself in her foolishness and falsehood of being a kind mistress. Startled by her final discovery, she starts running away from her new surroundings, when she hears the sound of the helicopter. According to M.A.Quayum,

Her masks of a liberal integrationist and would be power shares have dissolved and her possibility of adjusting to the circumstances of the veld and experiencing life from the other end have come to a naught (Gordimer's *Radical Critique of White 'Liberal' Attitude* 55)

Loss of Identity and Hybridity

The novel dramatizes the idea that without losing one's identity there can be no possibility of new birth from the existing difficult situation which is expected after the revival of the blacks in the future South Africa. Maureen fails to lose her identity by her unwillingness to forsake the feelings of

nostalgia. She keeps on clinging to the life 'out there' and to the 'ivory tower of white life' (Boyers: *A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer* 27) which she enjoyed in Johannesburg. Finally she runs to that illusion of past identity and fails to find any creative source for rebirth. The clash of two cultures results in Maureen's failure and she is forced to accept that. She has no access to the old life and has no ability to create a new one too. She has failed though she had the closest instinctual link to the two creative cultures.

July also proves his inability to lose his native identity. When he was a servant in the Smales' house in Johannesburg, he mimicked the English culture and language. After the reversal of roles, when Bam's family appears in July's world as his possessions, July's own people fail to respond to his master and servant role. Nancy Bailey observes: "Instead of gaining prestige through his possession of this family he arouses the hostility of the matriarchy and becomes a victim of its power. (*Living Without Future* 217)

He cannot assume the mantle of 'frog prince, Saviour' (*July's People* 9) that the Smales gave him in the beginning. He cannot save them nor is he able to save himself. During his final confrontation with his white mistress, he uses a barrage of words mixed with native dialect and broken English and rejects her once for all to redefine his life in his native environment. By this bold rejection, he rediscovers his freedom and retains his native identity by rejecting his sense of ambivalence with simultaneous feelings of fear and attraction that made him indecisive so far.

For Bam, the representative of the patriarchal system of Western civilization, the truck, the gun are not only the symbols of power but also objects that symbolize the inter-connection of the external world and the internal reality. But he survives the loss by his mechanical ability by setting up a water tank to the community. His children get excited by that 'new possession but when it is used by others he insists a non-capitalist basis for social relations that' it's their water...it's

for everybody. That's what I put the tank up for'(62).He uses his gun to kill two pigs and gives the larger one to the community as a matter of 'justice or the protocol of survival'(78). It is to be noticed that their possessions and investments prevent the Smales from moving to Canada but the loss of their possession as Gordimer suggests, has freed Bam to be fatherly and to assume the role previously appropriated by July with the Smales children. Nancy Bailey observes,

Though Bam plays his new role with distinction, Gordimer does not romanticize the relationship or suggest that it is a substitute for self-identity ('Living Without Future' 219)

The theft of the gun has a devastating blow on Bam's power and pride in societal and psychological terms. Yet he recovers himself in the same night to feed the children. He drinks the whole of the water bottle 'like an alcoholic who hides away to indulge secret addiction' (*July's People* 154).

When Bam's relationship with his wife dwindles in course of time, he remains tender and protective towards her. When Maureen withdraws from him, it leaves him silent, as Nancy Bailey observes, " an impotence more serious than the loss of sexual desire"(Living Without Future" (220).Bam has lost his communication with his wife and faces the helplessness of inarticulation.He struggled "hopelessly for words... The words were not there in his mind, his anger, had no grip" (127).

Though he experiences the loss of language and loss of identity, he survives all his difficulties.Yet there is no assurance of his rebirth or of the reintegration of self and community, which is essential for true individualism, as Carl Jung suggests. According to Nancy Bailey,

Nevertheless Bam, alone of the three protagonists, remains in what Jung suggests, is the feminine mode of relatedness, as well as the masculine one of action and thought (Living Without Future', 221)

At the end of the novel, Bam's identity is focused at the most primitive level of connection to his children.

New Culture

Bam's children, though felt difficult in adjusting to the new life in the beginning, later have no difficulty in coping up with the black culture. They play games, have friends and move with the blacks freely by becoming a part of the black socio- sexual, political-cultural heritage of the veld. They lack the hypocrisy and enigmatic idea of their mother. As M.A.Quayum observes,

They are more fluid and flexible to change. They are wiser than their mother because they are free from her 'liberal' sensibility that has created an invincible wall around her and made her a prisoner of her own consciousness (Gordimer's Radical Critique of White Liberal Attitude, 57))

As M.A.Quayum points out, the children effortlessly assimilate into the black culture surrounding them as time passes. They easily engage and integrate themselves into the socio-sexual, political, and cultural aspects of the black community in the veld (a rural landscape in South Africa).

Moreover, M.A.Quayum contrasts the children's openness and adaptability with the character of their mother, who is both hypocritical and enigmatic. He also notes that the children lack the same liberal sensibility as their mother, which has created a metaphorical barrier or "invincible wall" around her. This wall represents her limited perspective and her being trapped within her own consciousness.

The children, on the other hand, are portrayed as more fluid and flexible in their approach to change. They are depicted as wiser than their mother because they are not constrained by her liberal mindset. This suggests the ability of the children to embrace the new culture and shed the prejudices and it is also noted that the limitations of their upbringing allow

them to thrive and navigate in their new reality more effectively.

'Interregnum' – Gordimer's Ambivalence

In *July's People* which is termed as 'a parable of future,' Gordimer presents the apocalyptic situation prevailing in South Africa as Rowland Smith suggests 'she openly faces the unmentionable present'(qtd. in Bailey 215). The whites in South Africa feared the revolution and the novel begins with riots and burning of cities. In that morbid situation, Gordimer imagines a complete disruption of personal relationships and states the ambiguous plight of the whites as 'living in the interregnum', She defines,

Interregnum- a state of contradictions... not only between two social orders but between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undiscarded'(Essential Gesture 269)

This situation is felt by the Smales during their life in the veld where Maureen was haunted continuously by a disturbed sense 'of not knowing where she was, in time, in the order of the day as she had always known it' (*July's People* 43). Bam who has the same anxiety in him, checks his watch that has become 'a useless thing here' (43). Thus the glimpses of the past life intensify their sense of dislocation and leave them disjointed in this state of interregnum.

Maureen, in her self-delusion, runs towards the helicopter which is commented by Michael Neill as 'a profoundly ambiguous gesture' which cannot be interpreted even by herself. She runs into the future which can be imagined as 'a kind of absence or emptiness- an emptiness deriving from what Gordimer conceives as a radical abolition of meanings' (Translating the Present, Language, 74). In the state of interregnum, such abolition of meanings is necessary for it is the precondition for the establishment of new meanings and the transformation of identity for the hybrid future. Gordimer is aware of the fact that the historical co-ordinates cannot find a place in the new life and new ones exist not with the rulers but with the ruled. She aptly chooses a quotation from Gramsci as an

epigraph for her novel *July's People* to reveal this state of transition.

The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum

there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms. (*Selections from the Prison Notebook of Antonio Gramsci* 276)

New Future

Gordimer as a radical imagines a solution for this ambivalent state of interregnum. She insists that there can be no historical translation over to a new world without such a painful uprooting. As a liberal humanist, she is disappointed by the rise of Africanism. In her 'gloomier and least courageous moods' (*Essential Gesture* 31), she wants the whites to be the ordinary members of the multi-coloured society of New Africa free from the privileges. The New Africa will grant them legal rights, full citizenship and the voting right but most of the black movements do not accept the hand of whites in the New Future. The Black leader Desmond Tutu insists that the primary position for the blacks and the whites must be willing to follow them.

In such an atmosphere of interregnum, Gordimer delineates her presence in the South African society as 'minority within minority' (272) and also poses a question whether the whites should leave Africa for some had already left out of fear. Gordimer too develops an ambivalent thought to leave in order to find a society for herself. At the same time she has an obstinate and fearful desire to stay "I feel one desire with my head and the other with my guts" (34). She takes an emotional desire to stay with familiar faces in the place where she was born.

This sense of ambivalence in the mind of the whites is reflected in her novel *July's People* through the character Maureen. After the political change, the whites had two options either to change and integrate with the new culture or to turn away from it like Maureen. The true ones like the author are absorbed to the new culture while the hypocrites with liberal ideas will experience dilemma, dread and moral dead lock like Maureen. In her infinite optimism, Gordimer hopes that

children and adults who are susceptible to change themselves are fit to live in the future free New Africa for they are capable of creating a common culture in the black nation. She after overcoming her ambivalent thoughts, gives a bold advice to the whites to 'redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures' (EG,264).

Thus the research paper analyses the dynamic and evolving phenomenon of ambivalence in "July's People" and corresponds the observation of Edward Said who considers ambivalence as a necessary condition for critical thinking that allows the readers to recognize and question the multiple perspectives and contradictions in any given situation.

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