



## Between Revenge and Reconciliation: A Cultural Reading of Alex La Guma's *The Stone Country* and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*

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#### Abstract

This paper examines how the South African writers of Apartheid—Alex La Guma and Nadine Gordimer—approach, in their novels *The Stone Country* and *July's People*, the concern of racial evils brought by the discriminatory regime in South Africa. The study puts in confrontation two writers of different *racial backgrounds and gender* to explore how they capture the issue of racism that is corroding the South African society in its social, economical, cultural, ethnic, religious and racial ensemble. In fact, while La Guma is a coloured (black) male writer, his counterpart Gordimer is a white female writer. This racial attribute that distinguishes the two writers is particularly significant and plays a greater role in the analytical process to identify the common point they share and the point of divergence that renders them polar while approaching the same issue of racism. The discussion is guided by a Cultural approach of Foucault (1972) to understand the various instances found in the works that reflect cultural and social dynamics that pertain to the two warring communities (black and white) which populate South Africa. In the end, regardless of racial background, it is observed that both writers converge on the same idea that racism is a dehumanising and destructive evil that needs a quick action to stop and eradicate its aftermaths. However, the ways to achieve its eradication vary from one to another—La Guma basing on revenge and violence while Gordimer seeking for reconciliation to end racial discrimination.

**Keywords:** *apartheid, black, racial discrimination, reconciliation, revenge, South Africa, white*



Race and racism in South Africa during Apartheid brought a world of complete desolation. Much of the South African writing of the time depicts South Africa as a society in decay. La Guma (1967) and Gordimer (1981) do not hesitate to stigmatise the growing white racism that haunts the destiny of the South African black community. Blacks are constantly facing an unspeakable oppression that they enduringly seek to break its chains. For a black bleeding soul, to be strengthened from the outside requires protection against the grim subjugation that is threatening him for many years. Being black in South Africa implies not only living under the consequences of the past and family disorganisation but also facing the harsh vices of colour shock. Having been subject to numerous severe cases of violence, La Guma observes the bleak living conditions that the black community is constantly facing and finds them unbearable; he mourns the future of the black who is innocently murdered, unjustly arrested, jailed and unfairly sentenced up to death penalty. He laments:

With forty prisoners locked up in the middle of summer, the smell of sweat was heavy and cloying as the smell of death. The heat seemed packed in between the bodies of men, like layers of cotton wool; like a thick sauce which moistened a human salad of accused petty thieves, gangsters, rapists [...] few of them strangers to the cells, many already depraved and several old abandoned, sucking hopelessly at the bitter, disintegrating butt-end of life. (Sic pp. 80-81)

Since the society with unmitigated cruelty has made anathema the black man's colour, every black soul has developed a psychologically traumatic feeling whenever they experience the discriminatory hardships that are polarizing the nation. The black individual comes face to face with this colour shock—a situation that triggers deep painful sorrow—that is accompanied by a sort of tiring and agonizing hopelessness and bitterness. In addition, the narrator observes the brutal conditions of detention as dehumanising: the racist leaders of the nation intend to wipe out black existence devoid of protection. Blacks are left to themselves, ruined with a disintegrating status which does not give any sort of hope. La Guma's perception of a decaying South Africa couples with Gordimer's feeling; she portrays the nation as a vile world in which the persecution of the black community brings harsh consequences not only to blacks but also to the whites. She advises the white community to renounce their barbaric and immoral behaviour if they want to bequeath a dignified life to future generations. Being white, Gordimer admits that the black man lives under terror created by the white man. In her novel, the narrator describes the hardships of racial tensions and the potential aftermaths:

On the bed the man kept glancing at his watch but she knew hers was a useless thing (...); yet the deep and livid light that came flowing upon the bush from a setting sun under an inky storm ceiling, she could not stifle a feeling of agonizing alertness. The day ending. She watched the bush; her scale pathetic, a cat at a mouse-hole, before that immensity. (p. 43)

Being black in South Africa entails being forgotten and being herded in ghettos, in prisons and finally in grave. People are penned into a constant fear of death. In anyway whatsoever, the black man wants to be seen, to be heard and afterwards to be understood in all his dignity. If a person were rejected because he is not educated, he would hope one day to get the education required and aspire to compete with others. Equally, if one were excluded because he is economically poor, he would expect that one day he shall rise from the economic paucity he faces to a better socio-economic ascension. However, if a person is rejected on the basis of the colour of skin, he must feel a grieving pain to be excluded upon the dictates and attributes granted by nature—an inalienable condition for which he is not responsible. All the prejudice that excludes man out of his society basing on the colour of skin he was born with is the most despicable and dehumanising thinking. Thus, *July's People*, like *The Stone Country*, is set in a world of racial tensions brought by Apartheid in South Africa. Characters are found in a society shattered by racial stereotypes. While the white man enjoys all the opportunities granted by nature and his nation, the black man is deprived of all the possibilities that should uplift him to achieve human dignity. At the onset of *July's People*, the Smales—a white family—are enjoying an exotic life while July—their houseboy black servant—is starving yet living in a richly powerful family for which he is enslaving every day. He is totally dependent in every detail of his existence. However, there is a sense of hope that reminds the oppressed community that a promising future belongs to the dispossessed. This situation is exemplified in Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World* when she warns the white man of the dangers of self-destruction he is bringing to himself:

The danger [...] is we don't look to see what comes after the struggle, we don't think enough about what's there on the other side. You must know where you are going man. You ask any of the chaps in town how he thinks we are going to live when we've settled to live with whites. (p. 69)

The protagonist Max Van Den Sandt is not the only one to dream about the future. His dream is also shared with other freedom fighters. The new phase that these freedom

fighters foresee is depicted as a world where everything will turn upside down. Time is coming when the despised black will take over all that will have been used to be a property of the white. This idea in a black mind comes to reject the white man's corrupt mindset that a group of minority has the right to decide the fate of the majority. This new thinking feeds the black community of a strong awareness that Apartheid is linked to the white supremacy, capitalist exploitation and cultural oppression to stifle the *Other* race. These are some of the phases through which dehumanisation occurs. While Gordimer's characters personify a sense of reconciliation, La Guma suggests in *The Stone Country* a retaliative response to defeat the white man's dehumanising treatment against his black neighbour. Having been victim of the despicable horrors of racism, the writer believes that the achievement of black dignity will only be possible through a committed resistance at the price of black sacrifice. The plot describes the protagonist George Adams brutally arrested and jailed while propagating anti-governmental teachings. These propagandistic teachings are designed to sensitise black people about the risk of racial Balkanisation they are running. He therefore invites them to join a massive revolt in a way to counteract the evil plans of the white regime. He is sure he is running a dangerous risk; yet he accepts to lose life for a noble cause of black liberation, "George Adams did not have any regrets about his arrest. You did what you decided was the right thing, and then accepted the consequences. He had gone to meetings and had listened to the speeches, had read a little, and had come to the conclusion that what had been said was right." (p. 74)

The grief that George Adams is enduring incites him to claim back his dignity though he is sure the journey is difficult. He knows the white man is stronger by his social and political positions; yet he does not give in. In this struggle of the protagonist, La Guma unearths the bitter realities that blacks experience in the forgotten slums of the nation. It is a world of permanent conflicts that set blacks against whites or blacks against the police in some situations. Blacks are squeezed into an inglorious world of tensions in which the white man is always hunting them. La Guma introduces black characters who are perpetual victims of harassment and humiliation. He crafts the protagonist George Adams and his inmates such as Albert March as outcasts totally denied the right to pursue happiness as the whites do. The writer builds his choice of characters on the basis of a background of inferiority and superiority between races. Like Gordimer, his world depicts an individual who is racially superior or inferior and the one who is socially guilty or innocent. In their novels, they develop a man-hunting world in which the white is an absolute hunter and the black and afflicted game. This scene can also be observed in La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*: Constable Raalt, the white violent and brutal policeman, is the hunter while Michael Adonis is the hunted. George Adams in *The Stone Country* is the hunted while Butcherboy and his masters white guards are the hunters. Even the name

*Butcherboy* is here suggestive. The allegorical representation of its choice indicates that the man is typified by an extreme cruelty he directs against those of different race. He “butchers” the blacks. Equally, Max Van Den Sandt and July are respectively the hunted in *The Late Bourgeois World* and *July’s People*—the former being hunted by his parents and the latter by his chiefs—the Smales.

Like Gordimer, La Guma reclaims a South Africa featured by equality between peoples regardless of race. The victimisation that targets any racial category of individuals is an evidence of a corrupt leadership with no sense of morality. This explicates the animosity of the governmental institutions against their own citizens. From the overwhelming dehumanisation of racial segregation, mankind shall learn the place and role, the value and respect of human soul with all its inalienable rights. The two writers share the same idea that all South Africans should be granted an equal consideration based on human dignity. However, the ways to achieve such an inclusive society that they prophesy vary as the two hostile communities radicalise opposite beliefs with regard to the treatment the same society reserves them. In fact, the traumatising spirit of Apartheid has deeply affected La Guma in his physical and psychological existence. Whenever he traces the possibilities to get out of the racial imbroglio, he emphasises protest and an armed struggle—violent actions that he believes they can coerce the white man to give up the cruelty he exacts on the *Other*. The writer’s violent character in form of a retaliative response of *an eye for an eye* and *a tooth for a tooth* can be understood in this way.

Importantly to note, La Guma is not black; he is a Coloured who has gone through numerous tribulations of racial oppression. The Comb Test he went through, under the malice of the white man, to insure he is not white has left a painful wound in his psyche. While advocating a therapy of revenge in form of physical violence, he is instructing both the white and his fellow black that there is no other way to convince the white rascal about the necessity for change. His works are full of tragic moments which indicate that the only way of salvation and redemption of the black soul is through violent resistance. The alienation of the black community brings him to commit crimes he does not premeditate about. For instance, La Guma, in *The Stone Country*, creates a character under name The Casbah Kid who kills a white man to avenge his father. He murders the white because of an overflow of frustrations that have flooded his heart. Having seen how his father was hanged by the white authorities, he is not afraid to shed blood provided that it is a “white blood”. To him, killing a person especially a white provides him a cathartic relief that serves to appease the painful grief he is drowned in. He has become an orphan, not because of natural death, but out of man’s cruelty. Through the character of the same boy, The Casbah Kid, La Guma wants the black man to know and identify his foe. The white, being naturally violent, the writer suggests that violence would be an adequate

response to resolve the plight. This attitude based on retaliation would instruct the oppressor that his alienating nature will bring about his own destruction. Thus the narrator demands the black man to be violent at all costs in a way to demonstrate that he has enough capacity to challenge the enemy.

Brutus (1991) explains Gordimer's belief of the decaying white society. Examining the writer's oeuvre, the critic remarks that "Nadine Gordimer has tried to say [...] that white South Africa is becoming dehumanized, that is, afraid to live and feel as human beings do because it has agreed to live by a set of rules which are themselves inhuman; and that once it has accepted that premise, it must watch its own humanity withering away" (p. 97). In Brutus's view, Gordimer seems to launch a new era in the sense that her narratives are an outstanding protest against the white bourgeois home to which she belongs. In *July's People*, she satirises, for instance, the animosity and senselessness of the South African regime. She criticises the white man's self-destruction. It is important to highlight that Gordimer is white, yet having a different perception with the other whites of her community. She is interested in that she belongs to the restricted group of whites who are totally opposed to the immoral laws of Apartheid and who call for human understanding. Critic Brutus indicates that the narrator in *July's People* begins to think about better ways of dealing with hell in which she lives. She thus begins to feel much concern about the black man's cause. In her fiction, Gordimer tries to show that she detests racialism on grounds that it is an uncivilised attitude. She believes that one must forego personal freedom in order to secure the general happiness of the community. Brutus states that Gordimer is able and free to implement anything that her free will dictates (p. 102). Her novels *July's People* and *The Late Bourgeois World* send a cry that calls the white man back to love and humanity. It is an open rejection of the baseless white supremacy which makes tense black and white relationships.

Gordimer, though white, does not fail to denounce the contradictory nature of the white people and the irrationality of the judiciary system of the nation. Through the picture of the Smales (a white family) who represent the oppressive ruling system, it is revealed that the white community is being dehumanised, afraid to live and feel as humans do. That community has chosen to live by a set of rules designed to entertain a perpetual alienation over the deprived black masses. That is the reason why Brutus warns them that the society must watch its own existence withering away if it does not come back to humanity (p. 99). On the other hand, *The Stone Country* builds a picture of a man in a society who is haunted by loneliness, denial, complete exclusion and rejection in reference to his racial background. The loneliness and rejection are the perpetual expectations that the segregative law offers him. La Guma feels himself divorced from the great part of his society. He is shocked by the white behaviour of perceiving race and colour as relevant



factors in the assessment of the homogeneity that whites seek to attain. Similarly, Gordimer is shocked by the black suppression. She believes, however, in a possible reconciliation, a fact that reads like fiction in La Guma's feeling. In Gordimer's ideals, the reader understands that the black man is now aware that the days of the white supremacy are ending. The writer indicates that the black community must know that it has to do with a 'new man' who denies remaining in bondage endlessly; a man who is conscious that he is no longer a man in form. We are presented with a people whose chief worry is to begin a new era of what is to be done in order to change the status quo since the situation is more and more deplorable. Gordimer concretises this hope through the persona of the novel's protagonist July. July, a black boy, begins as a simple servant working for a bourgeois white family. He does not surrender to the tragic events of servitude he experiences in that household. He is hopeful time will come to quieten his broken heart and wrap its wounds. There is a constant hope through a feeling of bitterness:

He was waiting for her to say: would we go back? They had fled the fighting in the streets, the danger for their children, the necessity to defend their lives in the name of ideals they didn't share in a destroyed white society they didn't believe in [...]. Things would quieten down in a new way. (p. 51)

Gordimer is convinced that a divided society generates misunderstanding that inevitably ends up with destruction. The white community which believes in itself to possess power and control unfailingly the South African world commits a great mistake watered by a corrupt mindset of those who manage the nation. Conscious of their bitter truth, the writer presents a people whose sense of hope grows more and more. We are before a people—a black people—that feels the need to consult each other in a way to reclaim the humanity that has been forcibly usurped and confiscated by the white man. Admittedly, Gordimer and La Guma converge on the destructive nature of racism in South Africa. They agree together that being black in South Africa is a difficult experience: it means being part of the company of the bruised, the crushed, the scarred and the abandoned; this state of despair implies trying to hold on physical life amid psychological death as Tomson (1989) laments:

“Yea, give me liberty, or give me death” [...]  
For justice and Democracy have stood,  
Steeled in the faith that Right  
Will conquer Wrong. (St. 6-11; 273) [...]  
They tell us to forget

The Golgotha we tread...  
We who are scourged with hate,  
A price upon our head. (St. 3:11-4; 274)

The two writers assess Apartheid and its whole enterprise as a failure of mankind. They stigmatise its evils as living the pain of watching children growing up with clouds of inferiority and stagnation. The question of colour preoccupies many people who are haunted by human desolation caused by the racial policy. The hurdles in space and in time from depressing and dangerous subjugation cause the black man to cry out in protest. From the very start, La Guma's narratives are designed not only to describe violence, to represent it but also to be an act of violence itself and mobilisation to bring about awareness of the black community. In *The Stone Country*, La Guma explores another facet of the South African life—that of prisoners. He himself has been one and has consequently an inside knowledge of the nation's prison organisation. It is a joyless existence punctuated with an occasional humorous tone. It is a painful judgment against the society. As he describes, it is a miserable place where pain and grief are the only things black prisoners experience in cell. The protagonist George Adams is one of the politically subversive individuals—possibly the author in disguise. His invincible and subversive character is mirrored in a terribly radical hatred against Uncle Tom Butcherboy, a black traitor guard who betrays his fellow blacks and harasses them more maliciously than the white policemen. Drowned into deep sorrow, the black masses become profoundly heartbroken till rage explodes. Like the unnamed narrator and protagonist in Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1992), blacks, in La Guma and Gordimer's portrayal remain invisible before the white man. The invisibility they undergo buries the socio-cultural and historical identities that would define their existence. The black man becomes invisible since he is wrapped into dark which obliterates his destiny. It is this invisibility that La Guma and Gordimer together with other South African black writers decry unprecedentedly. Achebe stigmatises this loss of culture and identity in *The Novels of Achebe*—a situation that the writer examines as a society's ruin, "The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what had happened to them, what they lost." (p. 8)

La Guma and Gordimer manifest a common agreement on this affirmation. Once the awareness of the oppressed comes out and informs him about his identity defiled, he shall opt for working hard to effect change and get back the denied humanity. In the writers' view, the black man has the duty to take the lead in the opposition against the white man's profanation that is subverting black existence. Once he knows who he is, he will declare himself free. Unquestionably, black people have a humanity to reclaim and an



identity to defend as complete South African citizens rather than outsiders. In the end, it was discovered that the racial discrimination that had been institutionalised in South Africa brought about a world of horror that oppressed blacks and condemned the innocent whites who became victims of black revenge. While La Guma establishes revenge through a sworn violence against whites in both their physical and material existence, Gordimer rejects this retaliative spirit that she believes it would perpetuate the vicious circle of violence. She rather advocates mutual reconciliation that shall dissolve the polarity between the two communities to achieve complete reunification. These contradictory ideologies of revenge and reconciliation advanced as alternatives to achieve a peaceful society rise difficult to reach a common point. Yet, every position brings a significant contribution to stifle racism and to end the discriminatory regime of Apartheid.

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