

**UNRAVELLING LAYERS OF SIGNIFICANCE: SYMBOLS IN NADINE GORDIMER'S
JULY'S PEOPLE**

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Abstract

Symbols occupy a prominent role in Nadine Gordimer's Fiction. Several objects are invested with symbolic power in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. Gordimer presents Bam's gun and the yellow bakkie (and its keys) as objects that represent power in the text. At the beginning of the text the Smales family owns these objects, and as the narrative progresses their grasp on these objects of power becomes more tenuous, and July and other blacks assume ownership of the objects. The paper aims to focus on how Gordimer uses symbols to create uncertainties, anxieties, contradictions and ambiguities that characterize the new situation. The transfer of ownership, like the parallel transfer that occurs in Johannesburg, is uncomfortable for the whites involved. July, as well, experiences some discomfort as he takes power, in the form of the keys. The characters in the novel are continually forced to negotiate new ways of relating to one another, and Gordimer makes use of the awkward communication between the whites and blacks that result from a new power structure and the language barrier between them to illustrate the discomfort of that negotiation.

Key Words: Bakkie, Gordimer, Ownership, Power Structure, Symbols

Narrative techniques in literary writings are devices and methods employed by writers in their works for effectiveness and aesthetics. M. H. Abrams in his *The Glossary of Literary Terms* calls narrative technique, "narrative strategy" (6). He adds that that impressive and effective narrative techniques make literary works, literary. Narrative techniques help the writer convey a message or carry the text to the readers effectively, and also help the readers relate to the text efficiently. Narrative techniques include symbols, point of view, setting, leitmotifs, symbols and style. Some significant symbols in English literature are the letter A in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), the white whale in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), a huge pair of bespectacled eyes in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the journey in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and the kola nut in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

One of the narrative techniques employed by Nadine Gordimer in her fiction is the use of symbols. *The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines symbol as "an expression, often used in literature, that describes a person or quality by referring to something that is considered to have

similar characteristics to that person or quality” (481). In other words, a symbol is a concrete object to explain or describe an abstract idea. Jacques Derrida in *Acts of Literature* has emphasized the “indispensable reliance in all modes of discourse on symbols that are assumed to be merely convenient substitutes for ‘proper’ meanings” (28). Derrida argues that symbols are not mere convenient substitutes but indispensable part of any writing that hopes to be effective. According to Ernest Jones in *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis*, a symbol is an extended symbol “whereby one idea is used as a substitute for an abstract or at times, unwittingly, for unconscious idea; in other words, a symbol is the veiled, masked expression of a thought in a fantastic form which contains an analogy” (130). Winifred Nowotny in *The Language Poets Use* notes that, symbols help the writer to eliminate the wall between reality and imagination. I. A. Richards in *Philosophy of Rhetoric* says that symbols create the tenor of a text. M. H. Abrams in his *The Glossary of Literary Terms* notes that “symbols are essential to a literary text and they have been the subject of copious analyses by rhetoricians, linguists, literary critics and philosophers of language” (98). So, a symbol suggests much more than its literal meaning; it has an extended meaning; they hint, or, as Henry James in *The Art of Fiction* put it, they cast long shadows. Writers may use symbols in their works to make the invisible visible to the readers, and to better communicate with the readers. Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* defines a symbol as “Any unit of any literary structure that is an integral part of any literary text. It can be a word, a phrase, or an image used with some kind of special reference (which is what a symbol is usually taken to mean) are all symbols when they are distinguishable elements in critical analysis” (122). From all these definitions on symbols, it may be said that a symbol is a word or a person or a place or an object that a writer may use to represent something else.

Symbols work at two levels of meaning – the denotative and the connotative, and it is the latter that is crucial in a literary work because they suggest, thus opening immense possibilities for interpretative readings of a text. Explaining how symbolism provides meaning to writing, Alfred North Whitehead in *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect* states:

The human mind is functioning symbolically when some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions, and usages, respecting other components of experience. The former set of components are ‘the symbols’, and the latter set constitute the ‘meaning’ of the symbols. The organic functioning whereby there is transition from the symbol to the meaning will be called ‘symbolic references’. (7-8)

Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* employs a wide range of symbols to convey complex situations and intricate feelings. Stephen Clingman in *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* posits that “July’s People is a semiotic text” and therefore it calls for a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of “the signs and codes of the text and its relation to the reality of the future” (39). One of the codes or symbols that has been effectively employed in *July’s People* by Nadine Gordimer is a yellow pickup truck or bakkie. Bamford’s yellow bakkie is a symbol invested with several meanings. It symbolises the early privileged status of the Smales, as Whites, before the rebellion, then it is their vehicle for their fleeing to safety and then their dependence on their black servant July, and their ultimate helplessness and frustration when they see it slipping away

from their hands. It symbolises the changing power structure in the South African society after the revolution and also in the Smales household vis-à-vis their native servant July. As Stephen Clingman observes, “The transfer of the ownership of the bakkie is a symbol for the transfer of power from the Whites to the Blacks” (42). So, it also reveals the social and economic disruption that has occurred after the natives have taken over South Africa.

The bakkie was an exclusive possession of the Smaleses, which they would not share with anyone. It was a birthday acquisition of Bamford Smales. As Ali Erritouni in “Nation – States Intellectuals and Utopia in Postcolonial Fiction” notes, it [the bakkie] is linked “with a sharp psyche that is well shaped to the specifications of western consumer capitalism” (109). In this sense, the bakkie is an apt symbol for the affluence of the South African Whites.

The following quote well exemplifies how the bakkie that symbolised affluence later becomes a symbol for the dilapidation of white supremacy. It turns out to be a symbol for crumbling life of the Smales and the Whites all over South Africa:

The seats from the vehicle no longer belonged to it; they had become the furniture of the hut. Outside in an afternoon cooled by a rippled covering of grey luminous clouds, she [Maureen] sat on the ground as others did. Over the valley beyond the kraal of euphorbia and dead thorn where the goats were kept: she knew the vehicle was there. A ship that had docked in a far country. Anchored in the khaki weed, it would rust and be stripped to hulk, unless it made the journey back, soon. (46)

Thus, the bakkie is now no longer a symbol of privilege; it is parked miserably in a black desolated neighbourhood, ripped off all its trappings, and exposed to raw nature. Its seats are now used as seats inside the squalid hut inhabited by the Smales’ family; they also become a makeshift bed for Bamford Smales and his wife Maureen when they make love. The pickup truck looked less like a luxury pickup truck but more like an abandoned ship docked in an alien land; it will soon be either further stripped or will be left to rust and rot and eventually pass into oblivion. Either way, it is will be dead like the White supremacy of South Africa.

Bamford had acquired the yellow bakkie not for utility purposes but for pleasure. Initially his wife Maureen was not happy when her husband when he arrived home driving the vehicle. But very soon, when she saw their children ecstatically admiring the truck, she too begins to like it. It was as usual: she enjoyed shopping and she was happy whenever they bought things, and this included the bakkie also, “Nothing made them so happy as buying things” (34).

But everything has changed now. The bakkie becomes their vehicle of escape:

The yellow bakkie that was bought for fun turned out to be the vehicle: that which bore them away from the gunned shopping malls and the blazing, unsold houses of a depressed market, from the burst mains washing round bodies in their Saturday-morning garb of safari suits, and the heat-guided missiles that struck Boeings carrying those trying to take off from Jan Smuts Airport. (21 – 22)

Following the renewed riots, now more intense and incessant, the Smales escape from Johannesburg to July’s village in the bakkie. They travel only at night and do not use headlights, for fear of drawing the attention of the revolutionaries, “Bam did not use the headlights and was

guided by July moving along in the dark ahead of him, as he had been for certain stretches of the journey. That way they had avoided both patrols and roving bands” (25). Often, they ran out of petrol, and July went into some dark settlements at night and came back with a can of petrol and they resumed their journey at night. July knew that the black attendants of the petrol pumps usually lived in rickety sheds behind the pump complex and so he could easily get petrol in these troubled times. He also found the Smaleses food and water. During day time, they did not drive. They stopped the bakkie and the children crawled under the vehicle and slept. Then resumed their journey again at night. It was a distance of six hundred kilometres and what would have in normal circumstances taken a full day’s continuous driving, became a drudgery for three days and three nights. Once they reach July’s village, the bakkie undergoes a transformation, similar to the lives of the Smales’ family.

The theme that is at the centre of *July’s People* are four losses brought by the rebellion in the lives of the Smaleses, who are representative of the White population of South Africa: the loss of social control; the loss of survival control; the loss of individualism and the loss of control over resources. The bakkie represents the loss of control over resources. After the revolution and the escape to July’s village, the ownership and control over the bakkie change. In this new situation, Bamford is only the nominal owner and the de-facto owner is July who holds the key of the car. Once July, with his friend Daniel, takes the bakkie to the town, without seeking Bamford’s permission to use it. Though Bamford and Maureen are furious about the behaviour of July with the bakkie, they are helpless. This helplessness is indicated by the desperation of Bamford when he realises the bakkie has been taken away by July, without his permission:

He [Bamford] got up and had the menacing aspect of maleness a man has before the superego has gained control of his body, come out of sleep. His always limp penis was now swollen under his rumpled trousers. He went off round all the huts, from one to another . . . There was nowhere to run to. Nothing to get away in to safety. All he could say to Maureen was that it was July – July. (39-40)

On July’s return, they find him more defiant and callous in attitude. He seemed to suggest that just like the Smaleses are under his control, the bakkie too is under his hold. Bamford and Maureen could not even dare to ask him for the bakkie keys:

There was the moment to ask him for the keys. But it was let pass . . . They stood in the midday sun and watched, over at the deserted dwelling place, the yellow bakkie being reversed, bucking forward, leaping suddenly backwards again; kicking to a stop. July was at the wheel. His friend was teaching him to drive. . . .

And Bamford blurted out, “I would never have thought he would do something like that. He’s always been so correct.” Bam paused to be sure she [Maureen] accepted the absolute rightness, the accuracy of the word. “Never gave any quarter, never took any, either. A balance. In spite of all the inequalities. The things we couldn’t put right. Oh, and those we could have, I suppose.”

Gratitude stuffed her throat to choking point. “We owe him everything”. Her husband smiled; it didn’t weigh against the keys of the vehicle, for them. (58)

After this incident July begins to use the bakkie as his own; he has not returned the key to Bamford. He is often seen taking it away for longer durations. He has also allowed his friend Daniel to use it at times. The change is also seen in July driving the bakkie himself. While in Johannesburg, the Smales had it to themselves; on the escape journey, Bamford drove and July guided. Now, July has learnt to drive also:

He [July] was enthusiastic about his prowess with the vehicle.

“You know I’m turning round already? I’m know how to go back, everything. My friend [Daniel] he’s teaching me very nice.”

“I saw. You didn’t say you were going to learn to drive. You never said you wanted to learn.” (59)

Thereafter, the bakkie becomes a point of contention and cold war; it comes to symbolise the edgy and tense relationship between the adult Smaleses and July.

Earlier, in Johannesburg, July was servile and kept his place. He then knew his boundaries and limitations and never transgressed them. He even often deprecated his skills and abilities. He himself indicated to his white masters that he knew his place. Now, after the rebellion, he was assertive and was also indicating his place; but it was a different situation. Maybe he was indicating to the Smales their place now.

July’s new assertiveness is also evident when he just laughs as Bamford tells him that he [July] could be apprehended for driving around the bakkie without a license:

He laughed. “Who’s going to catch me? The white policeman is run away when the black soldiers come that time. Sometime they take him, I don’t know . . . No one there can ask me, where is my licence. Even my pass, no one can ask me anymore. It’s finished. “I’m still worried that someone will come to look for us here because of the bakkie.” “The bakkie? You know I’ll tell them. I get it from you in town. The bakkie, it’s mine. Well, what can they say? (59)

When July here says “It’s finished” (73), he is investing this utterance with several meanings, ‘It’ could mean the bakkie and the white supremacy too, and ‘finished’ means the ownership and the power which has now been transferred to the Blacks and there is new social order now. Here July is strongly suggesting that he is no longer accountable to the Whites as there is new social order and he cannot be penalised even for traffic violations.

The tables have now turned in favour of the Blacks and against the Whites. There should be no misunderstanding of the new power system. The bakkie and its key are de facto July’s, though he returns them when they end this tense exchange. However, the return of the key is only nominal; July can take it back when he wants. As, Stephen Clingman in *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* rightly tells, “By the time he returns them [the keys], Gordimer makes it seem as though July is in fact lending the bakkie to the Smaleses for the time being” (41). This new situation and reversal can be contrasted with July’s earlier behaviour in Johannesburg. Maureen recollects the days when July would ask for everything; he had internalised the norm “to ask for everything. Even an aspirin. Can I use the telephone? Nothing in that house was his” (155). His stay in Johannesburg had to be approved and authorised by the good will of the Smales, Maureen would have to sign his travel and residence pass every month. As an act of good will, she signed his pass every month. Like all the Blacks, he was mandated to fulfil numerous obligations,

with no rights. This placed him in “a state of total dependency” (155). But now his defiance and refusal to ask for permission to use the pickup truck is actually a defiance and rejection of the authority of the Smaleses. He seems to suggest that the old order is now dead, as Nadine Gordimer says with an “explosion of roles” (117). So, Rosemarie Bodenheimer in “The Interregnum of Ownership in *July's People*” says that, “Struggling unsuccessfully to maintain the rights of possession, the Smales couple manifest the ‘morbid symptoms’ of a dying consumerist culture in which identity is created by ownership and relationships are mediated by objects” (109). The inability of the adult Smaleses to be reconciled to a reversal of fortunes and roles is representative of the intransigent reaction of most of the Whites to a radically changed socio-political environment in South Africa.

July's control over the bakkie is not an incidental happening. It is a crucial and pertinent point of revelation for the Smaleses. Already they have started distrusting July. In case of a conflict between the Smaleses and July, their only chance of escape was the bakkie and now it is also controlled by July. Earlier, before the revolution, the bakkie symbolised the affluence and privileged status of the Smaleses; then, during the revolution, it stood as a ray of hope, possibility and means for escape to freedom and safety for the Smales' family. So, it came to symbolise their access to mobility and destiny. But finally, July's new control over the bakkie is a symbol for the transfer of power and the changed political and social topography of a new South Africa.

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