

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v4i2.458

**The Power Struggle between The Colonizer and The Colonized through Fanonism in
July's People by Nadine Gordimer¹**

Şahin Kızıltaş², M. Başak UYSAL³

Abstract

Frantz Fanon is an outstanding figure whose theories are attached great importance in post-colonial studies by researchers and literary critics. His theories particularly on violence and national consciousness have been discussed for many years, even today. The colonizers have charged him with legitimating violence and for them he is responsible for the bloody picture in the colonial world. On the other hand, the colonized people have regarded him as the prophet of the Third World raising national consciousness of the oppressed and the excluded.

As a white novelist in South Africa during and after apartheid regime, Nadine Gordimer takes an important place in post-colonial studies due to her attention on political and racial issues. Among her masterpieces, written in 1981 after Soweto Uprising and banned by the white regime, *July's People* comes to the forefront. It is the story of a white family, The Smales, fleeing from Johannesburg to the small village of their black servant, July, during the civil war in South Africa. In this requisite travel, the roles of white family and their black servant substitute. The black people become the protectors of the white family who have been the master of the black in the city. However, the white family does not seem to be eager to leave their power, dominion and superiority even in rural area among black society.

In this study, the dilemma of this role replacement through racial implications and references according to Frantz Fanon's theory is aimed to be discussed.

Keywords: Fanonism, Nadine Gordimer, *July's People*, Racism, Colonialism

¹ This paper was presented in the 2nd English Studies Conference which was held between 8-10 May 2015 in Karabuk University.

² Bitlis Eren Üniversitesi, sahinkiziltas@gmail.com

³ Atatürk University, mbuysal@atauni.edu.tr

Frantz Fanon is an outstanding figure whose theories are attached great importance in post-colonial studies by researchers and literary critics. Owing to his endeavours to be the voice of the colonized, the excluded and the oppressed people in colonial world, he has acquired an esteemed position among the people of Third World. He is descendant of African slaves and the son of a minor official in French colonial service. He was brought up under the colonial practices of French government on the black people and influenced by Aime Césaire, an important pen of literary Negritude Movement⁴. He has also read and was influenced by existentialists such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre and Marxists such as Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky (Hansen, 2011). All these have led him to a deep feeling against the oppressed and the colonized black people and their racial problems almost every day they face with. He has dealt with the mental and psychological world of the colonized black people, especially the ones in South Africa and the U.S.A. where racial practices are carried out through the Repressive State Apparatuses.⁵ Because of his latitude and sympathy to the oppressed black people in these countries, his masterpiece *The Wretched of the Earth* has been approved as the Bible among black freedom fighters in the U.S.A. (Clever, 1967) and his books except for *The Black Skin White Mask* have been banned by apartheid regime in South Africa (Wallerstein, n.d.).

Fanon expounds the living spaces and conditions of the white and black people in colonies which are completely dissimilar:

The settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes although the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones. The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things. The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners.

⁴Negritude Movement is a literary movement began after the end of 20th century among French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in Paris aiming to protest French colonial rule and the policy of assimilation.

⁵'Repressive State Apparatuses' is a term developed in Marxist theory that includes government, police, courts, jails and army to intervene and act in favour of the ruling class by repressing the ruled class by violent and coercive means.

The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs (Fanon, 1963, p. 39).

Fanon's description of living spaces of the colonizer and the colonized in colonial world well – suit with South Africa. As a witness of colonial practices in South Africa, Gordimer mentions the unfair and unequal living spaces of white and non-white people in her novels. She describes the terrible living conditions of black people living in suburbs:

Everyone home: 'home' the streets; a habitation without barriers, the houses' breached walls spilling inmates, the tottering fences one with the components – tin, hubcaps, rotting board – of totemic rubbish mounds. Workers' dungarees were the flags hung out drying spread cruciform with the logos of construction companies and soft-drink plants stitched across them (Gordimer, 1990, p. 107-108).

In the same way, she depicts the huts where black people live in:

She slowly began to inhabit the hut around her, empty except for the iron bed, the children asleep on the vehicle seats – the other objects of the place belonged to another category: nothing but a stiff rolled-up cowhide, a hoe on a nail, a small pile of rags and part of a broken Primus stove, left against the wall. The hen and chickens were moving there; but the slight sound she heard did not come from them. There would be mice and rats. Flies wandered the air and found the eyes and mouths of her children, probably still smelling of vomit, dirty, sleeping, safe (Gordimer, 1982, p. 4).

This is a description of a hut where black people live in and the Smales family had to stay just for a day. However, the house of this white family in the city is quite different. Gordimer tells that the house is relatively luxurious and it includes seven rooms, a swimming pool and there are servants in this house (Gordimer, 1982, p. 25). The master bedroom of this house is also en suite (Gordimer, 1982, p. 9).

Believing in a deep gap between the colonizers and the colonized, Gordimer compares it through describing lifestyles of white Vera Stark and black Zeph Rapulana:

The circumstances of the lives backed up behind them each had lived so far where an obstacle to the shared references of ordinary friendship. She a middle-class city woman – that was as much decisive as whiteness, ordering the services of her life by telephone or fax, taking for granted a secretary and a bay for her car at the office; his status in his rural community marked – it was not difficult to picture from experience of these places – by neat clothes hanging on a wire and the small pile of books and papers in a shack – what did they share of the familiar, outside the Odenerville affair? (Gordimer, 1994, p. 122)

In the country, racial acts are in force and the white regime upholds the racial laws in social life. These racial practices in social life are known as ‘petty apartheid’. Maylam gives examples on woeful and ludicrous racial discrimination practices:

The application of this ‘petty apartheid’ was at times tragic, at times absurd. There were those cases where an ambulance would arrive at the scene of an accident and refuse to convey an accident victim to hospital if the victim’s colour was wrong for that particular ambulance. People died as a result of this rigid adherence to apartheid rules. The absurdity of petty apartheid is well exemplified in the case of coloured usherettes employed to direct patrons to their seats in whites-only cinemas – on condition that they kept their heads down and did not look at the screen, in the case they might catch a glimpse of the film (Maylam, 2003, p. 184).

As a live witness and interpreter of racial practices in South Africa (Magarey, 1974, p. 3-7), Gordimer cannot be indifferent to this reality and she emphasizes on the racial problems that prevent the colonized people to have equal opportunities with the colonizers. She asserts that the colonized people and the colonizers cannot go to the same restaurant (Gordimer, 1958, p. 123), to the same pub (Gordimer, 1990, p. 64) and to the same cinema (Gordimer, 1990, p. 186) and they cannot stay in the same hotel (Gordimer, 1994, p. 190). The colonized people cannot board the same train with the colonizers either. Sonny and his students are among these unlucky colonized people:

What a disaster. There was a wash away, I herded them together at this siding hoping to get them onto a train. We stood there for hours in torrential rain and when a train came it was for whites and the driver wouldn't let us on. – He laughed at the vision of himself. – The kids were wet as seals. They took it as a great adventure (Gordimer, 1990, p. 210).

This reality of apartheid policy in South Africa is what Nelson Mandela announces to the world. He alleges that South Africa does not keep up with the civilized nations. Focusing on racial discrimination policy in every sphere of life in his country, he states he has witnessed in other African countries that white and black people live together in the same neighbourhood, go to the same hotels and cinemas, run stores in same districts and get on the same means of transport (Mandela, 1986, p. 55). These living opportunities are what his people have been deprived of and what he looks forward to coming true in his country one day in the future.

Acting as the consciousness of her society (Erritouni, 2006, p. 80), Gordimer has touched on the racial and social problems she has witnessed in her society that are unspoken but experienced by people. She has discussed unequal living conditions of white minority and non-white majority in her novels. For example, she asserts that the white people abstain from food and drinks in order to get the taste of them better or make their taste perfect. But the diet of black people is compulsorily, they cannot find anything to eat and drink (Gordimer, 1958, p. 85).

The social traumas and discrimination that the colonized people have experienced has engaged attention of Gordimer. Not only has she refused to abide by the racist policy of white regime but also she has focused on the racial discrimination of apartheid system and its influences on the psychology of the colonized people:

Nadine Gordimer's subject matter in the past has been the effect of apartheid on the lives of South Africans and the moral and psychological tensions of life in a racially-divided country, which she often wrote about by focusing on oppressed non-white characters. She was an ardent opponent of apartheid and refused to accommodate the system, despite growing up in a community in which it was accepted as normal (Nadine Gordimer, n.d.).

In an interview, Gordimer has accounted for what racism and racial discrimination mean in South Africa:

In South Africa racism in its brutally destructive guises, from killing in conquest to the methodology of colonialism, or certified as divine religious doctrine, took the lives of thousands of Africans and stunted the lives of millions more, systematically. I grew up in the Union that came out of wars for possession between the British and descendants of the Dutch, the Boers. The African had already been dispossessed by both. I was the child of the white minority, blinkered in privilege as conditioning education, basic as ABC. But because I was a writer—for it's an early state of being, before a word has been written, not an attribute of being published—I became witness to the unspoken in my society (Gordimer, 2009, p. 71).

Living in such an unequal environment deprived of all sorts of humanly living means, the colonized people realize that they should withstand repressive and marginalizing policy of white regime. They are well aware of the fact that the way to get rid of the hard living conditions is holding the power since superiority and oppression of the white people is due to their power they hold. So the disobedience of the colonized people is the struggle of holding the power. Gordimer symbolizes power with private properties and she empowers both the colonizers and the colonized people through their properties (Gordimer, 1982).

In the novel, the colonizers are represented through the Smales family and the colonized people are represented through July, the servant of white family. In the city white people own everything, including black servants, to sustain their lives and they are powerful. But some day they find themselves in the environment of poverty and desperation. While they can easily take water from taps in their house in the city whenever they need, they have to keep this tap-water in a plastic can and they have to hide it from other people and drink it secretly (Gordimer, 1982, p. 12). This scene occurs in the properties of black people where the white people lose their power.

However, the Smales family has led themselves to believe that they are powerful and they own everything. Although their survival is by courtesy of black people and their mercy, they act as if they were the owner of everything same as before. This feeling among white people is so common that they bring up their children with this perception. Victor, the little

son of Smales family, is one of these children. He wants to play with his racing-car track and show them to black children around but he feels obliged to warn his mother:

-But tell them they mustn't touch it. I don't want my things messed up and broken. You must tell them.

She laughed as adults did, in the power they refuse to use.

-I tell them? They don't understand our language.

-The boy said nothing but kicked steadily at the dented, rusted bath used for their ablutions (Gordimer, 1982, p. 14).

White people are sensitive to their belongings which represent their power and they cannot even tolerate the possibility of sharing them with anyone else. In fact, they are not only sensitive to their belongings but the ones that do not pertain to them. Victor, once again shows his ambition about embracing everything:

-Everybody's taking water! They've found it comes out the tap. Everybody's taking it! I told them they are going to get hell, but they don't understand. Come quick, dad!

The black faces of his companions were alight with the relish of excitement coming, the thrill of chastisement promised for others.

-But it's their water, Victor. It's for everybody. That's what I put the tank up for. [...]

-Ow, dad, it's ours, it's ours! ...

-Who owns the rain?

The preachy reasonableness of his mother goaded him.

-It's ours, it's ours! (Gordimer, 1982, p. 62)

Furthermore, this instinct of possession has led white people to display selfish behaviours. When they, even in desperate straits, are obliged to share their belongings, they always protect their benefits. For instance Bam Smales goes hunting with a young black boy and hunts two piglets. They bring them to village and start to chop while the villagers watch them. His wife Maureen recommends him to share it with villagers: "Give them the bigger

one.” (Gordimer, 1982, p. 78). This sharing seems quite fair, because the black people are more crowded. Yet, the suggestion of Maureen is due to her selfishness not due to her sense of justice: “The small one will be more tender.” (Gordimer, 1982, p. 78).

On the other hand black people get stronger in their properties and their sheepish, submissive and passive psychology converts into insubordinate and active psychology. They are more confident anymore. When the gun of Bam Smales is stolen, his wife Maureen recurrently demands July to go and bring their stolen gun. Her speaking style and tone of voice disturbs July and he reacts to her:

He stuffed the notebook into his shirt-pocket torn and neatly sewn back with unmatched thread by Ellen. – How I must get that gun? Where I’m going find it. You know where is it? You know? Then if you know why you yourself, your husband, you don’t fetch it? (Gordimer, 1982, p. 151)

This type of speaking style is inappropriate for a relationship between master and servant. However the black servant is powerful in his property and he speaks of in a reproving tone against his former master:

-Me? I must know who is stealing your things? Same like always. You make too much trouble for me. Here in my home too. Daniel, the chief, my mother, my wife with the house. Trouble, trouble from you. I don’t want it any more. You see? (Gordimer, 1982, p. 151).

The colonized people in all colonies long to possess the power in the hands of the colonizers. In the story, a symbol representing power is the yellow bakkie and its keys. The black servant has taken them without the permission of his masters. This behavior has annoyed them and they comment on this situation during watching him trying to learn driving the bakkie with the help of his friend:

- I would never have thought he would do something like that. He’s always been so correct. - Bam paused to be sure she 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 (Gordimer, 1982, p. 58).

They escape from armed black revolutionists under favour of their black servant and they are grateful to him since they are alive by means of him; nevertheless, it has no meaning for Bam Smales:

Gratitude stuffed her crop to choking point. – We owe him everything.

Her husband smiled; it didn't weigh against the keys of the vehicle, for them. ...

-I'd give him the keys any time. I could teach them to drive, myself – he hasn't asked me (Gordimer, 1982, p. 58).

The other symbol representing power is “the gun” and the colonized people ask for that power first politely. The chief of July's village asks Bam whether he has a gun or not:

– You not got another kind, revolver? – The kind white men are known to keep in their bedrooms, to protect their radios and TV sets and coveted suits of clothing? – I don't shoot people.– A short disgusted snort from the black man; a backwash of laughter (Gordimer, 1982, p. 120).

The colonized people demand that power from the colonizers to deliver them voluntarily but the colonizers reject. Yet, the colonized people are so decisive to have the power and they have it without the consent of the colonizers. Bam does not give his gun to chief but one day the gun is stolen: “When the white family got back to the hut, the gun was gone.” (Gordimer, 1982, p. 142).

When the colonizers lose their power, they lose everything. The gun symbolizes their power and when they lose it, there is nothing left:

Bam looked behind, around him; sat down on the bed. He nodded a long time. [...] He heaved himself up. Some surge of adrenalin summoned, sending him striding out, ducking his big head under the doorway. But he walked immediately into their gaze again. He lay down on his back, on that bed, the way he habitually did, and at once suddenly rolled over onto his face, as the father had never done before his sons. [...] She looked down on this man who had nothing, now. There was before these children something much worse than the sight of the women's broad backsides, squatting (Gordimer, 1982, p. 145).

Gordimer describes the psychological state of the people who lose their power. Those people become miserable and they are right to fear of losing the power since it gives them the opportunity to do whatever they want. On his property, the chief is powerful and he has the right to do anything he wants as once the white farmers do:

The chief wanted them to move on; the three children running in and out the hut with their childish sensationalism, their complaints, their brief ecstasies, his wife knocking a nail into her sandal with a stone, and he, shaving outside where there was light. Would tell them to go. What business of the chief's to tell them where? He had not asked them to come here. A wide arc of the hand: plenty place to go. And this was not their custom, but the civilized one; when a white farmer sold up, or died, the next owner would simply say to the black labourers living and working on the land, born there: go (Gordimer, 1982, p. 104).

Accordingly, they are right to fear of losing the power since they do not have an identity if they are not powerful. The colonized people do not have even a real name or identity when they are not powerful. For example, the author does not give the real name to July as far as he becomes powerful on his properties. July's real name in the story is first used just after the gun has stolen:

The match worked from the right corner of the chief's mouth to the left. He sucked once at the gap in his teeth. – How many you got there by Mwawate's place? – One eye closed, hands in position, taking aim. Of course, 'July' was a name for whites to use; for fifteen years they had not been told what the chief's subject really was called (Gordimer, 1982, p. 120).

However, the struggle of colonized people to have the power can be read as a decolonization struggle. In order to have the keys of bakkie and the gun, the colonized people either take them without the consent of the colonizers or they commit a theft. And this justifies Fanon's claim: "Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder." (Fanon, 1963, p. 36). Fanon goes further and says:

The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and blood-stained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first, this will only

come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists (Fanon, 1963, p. 37).

Gordimer seems to be in tune with Fanon. In the story, the gun is stolen by Daniel, a friend of July, and he participates in insurgents who target to seize the power through using violence: “So he’s gone to fight. Little bastard.” (Gordimer, 1982, p. 153).

The colonized people have the power but whether they will use that power against the colonizers is indeterminate. The novel ends with this ambiguousness and the readers can never learn what Daniel and his revolutionist friends have done with the gun. This is Gordimer’s own ambiguity in the years that she has written the novel.

Yet, one thing is certain that Gordimer believes in the fact that there are not any choices for both black and white people in the country except for living together. The Smales family aim to escape from the village right from the start they come, but later they push the limits to stay there (Gordimer, 1982, p. 105). For Gordimer, the white people have no other way except accustoming to living with the black people in order to survive even though they want to escape from the blacks and their living conditions.

References

- Cleaver, E. (1967). *Post-prison Writings and Speeches*. New York: Vintage Ramparts.
- Erritouni, A. (2006). Apartheid Inequality and Post-apartheid Utopia in Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People*. *Research in African Literatures*, 37 (4), 68-84.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the World* (Trans. Constance Farrington), New York: Grove Press.
- Gordimer, N. (1958). *Başka Dünyalar* (Trans. Günsel İçöz), İstanbul: Can Yayınları.
- Gordimer, N. (1982). *July’s People*, Great Britain: Penguin Books.
- Gordimer, N. (1990). *My Son’s Story*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Gordimer, N. (1994). *None to Accompany Me*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Gordimer, N. (2009). Literary Witness in a World of Terror: The Inward Testimony. *New Perspective Quarterly*, 26 (1), 66-72.

- Hansen, W. W. (2011). Fanonism. *Historical Materialism*, 19 (2), 175-182. doi: 10.1163/156920611X582879
- Magarey, K. (1974). Cutting the Jewel: Facets of Art in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories, *Southern Review*, 7, 3-28.
- Mandela, N. (1986). *Özgür Bir Güney Afrika* (Trans. Ayşegül Erol), İstanbul: Belge Yayınları.
- Maylam, P. (2003). *South Africa's Racial Past*, England: Ashgate Publishing.
- Nadine Gordimer. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/nadine-gordimer>
- Wallerstein, I. (n.d.). Fanon and the Revolutionary Class. Retrieved from <http://home.ku.edu.tr/~mbaker/CSHS503/WallersteinonFanon.pdf>