

*Dystopia And Existentialism In African Dystopian Novels:
A Critical Reading Of Nadine Gordimer's July's People (1981)*

ديستوبيا والوجودية في الروايات الأفريقية الاستشرافية:

قراءة نقدية لرواية نادين جورديمير شعب جولي

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ملخص:

يعتبر النوع السردى الاستشرافى الأفريقى مجالاً مهماً وأرضاً خصبة لاستكشاف مظاهر الوجودية. يسعى هذا المقال إلى إظهار فلسفة سارتر للوجودية في رواية نادين جورديمير الاستشرافية شعب جولي (1981). تقدم الرواية رؤية عميقة حول الموضوعات الوجودية. تهدف هذه الدراسة أيضاً إلى إظهار المكانة المهمة لفلسفة الوجودية في الأدب الاستشرافى الأفريقى. يركز بشكل أساسى على فكرة سارتر عن «الوجود» و «الجوهر» بنظرة استشرافية. توضح رؤية جورديمير الاستشرافية بقوة كيف أصبح المجتمع الأبيض الذي خلق الأزمة الوجودية لسكان جنوب إفريقيا السود محاصرين في نهاية المطاف في أزمة من صنعهم، مما يشير إلى أن أنظمة القمع، مثل الفصل العنصرى، تخلق ظروفاً وجودية غير مستدامة لجميع المعنيين. من خلال هذه الرؤية الاستشرافية للفخ المتبادل، تتجاوز جورديمير الإدانة الأخلاقية البسيطة لتقدم نقد وجودى عميق للفصل العنصرى. يوضح سردها الاستشرافى كيف أن نظام الفصل العنصرى، الذي صممه البيض لتأمين امتيازهم من خلال زعزعة استقرار الوجود للمجتمع الأسود بشكل منهجى، يخلق في النهاية الظروف للانحيار الوجودى للمجتمع الأبيض عندما ينهار النظام نفسه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأبرتاييد، تجريد اقليمى، الجوهر، ديستوبيا، الوجودية.

Abstract:

The African dystopian narrative genre is an important field and a fertile ground for exploring the manifestations of existentialism. This article seeks to demonstrate the Sartrean philosophy of existentialism within Nadine Gordimer's dystopian novel *July's People* (1981), which provides profound insights into existential themes. This study also aims to show the significant place of the philosophy of Existentialism in African dystopian literature. It focuses mainly on Sartre's notion of "existence" and "essence" within a dystopian vision. Gordimer's dystopian vision powerfully illustrates how the white creators of the existential crisis for Black South Africans ultimately became trapped in a crisis of their own making, suggesting that systems of oppression, like Apartheid, create unsustainable existential conditions for everyone involved. Through this dystopian vision of reciprocal entrapment, Gordimer transcends simple moral condemnation to offer a profound existential critique of Apartheid. Her dystopian narrative demonstrates how the Apartheid system, designed by Whites to secure their privilege by systematically destabilizing Black existence, ultimately creates the conditions for white existential collapse when the system itself falls apart.

Keywords: Apartheid; Deterritorialization; Dystopia; Essence; Existentialism.

1. INTRODUCTION:

This article explores the way Nadine Gordimer’s dystopian novel, *July’s People* (1981), manifests the principles of the philosophy of Existentialism. The novel is not only a speculative narrative about life in post-Apartheid South Africa but also a manifestation of existentialist principles through dismantling social identities and power dynamics. By situating the liberal white family in a dystopian scenario, where they must depend on their former servant, July, Gordimer creates a philosophical space that exposes Sartrean principles of Existentialism in the form of social constructs that force characters into a continuous process of self-creation instead of sticking to a false one. The most important existentialist principles manifested in the novel are radical freedom, existence precedes essence, and the notions of bad faith and vigor.

The dystopian narrative becomes a profound philosophical exploration of existentialist principles mainly through deconstructing the social identity of the white and black South African people. In this respect, the problematic can be expressed in the various questions, mainly: how do characters in Gordimer’s novel construct authentic identity when social structures collapse? What happens to the self when previously fixed social roles of Apartheid are suddenly inverted? Moreover, how does Gordimer’s dystopian narrative enrich and contribute to the philosophy of Existentialism within the historical context of South Africa?

The research questions of this study revolve around the way Gordimer strategically employs the dystopian genre to reflect the crisis of existentialism in post-Apartheid South Africa. In other words, how does Gordimer’s novel portray the dissolution of Apartheid’s authoritarian structures as a catalyst for an existential crisis, and what does this relationship reveal about the connection between political systems and personal identity? In addition, how does Gordimer use the fictional collapse of Apartheid within a dystopian genre to explore larger questions about authenticity, freedom, and responsibility when socially constructed identities are destabilized? Still, more importantly, Gordimer positions the collapse of Apartheid as not merely a political transition but a fundamental rupture in meaning-making systems that forces characters to confront existential questions. In this perspective, an important question arises: how does Gordimer’s novel examine the paradox that liberation from an oppressive system like Apartheid can simultaneously trigger a profound existential crisis for those whose identities are shaped by that system?

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The approach which appropriately captures the existential crisis in Gordimer's dystopian novel is Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism, precisely his most philosophical assertion, "the primacy of existence over essence"¹. In this context, the Sartrean philosophy of Existentialism, when present in the African dystopian genre, offers profound insights as concerns themes of identity, absurdity, and resistance against the oppressive and segregating Apartheid system.

The way the Sartrean philosophy of Existentialism manifests itself in Gordimer's dystopian novel consists of the way it resonates with and informs the dystopian genre, mainly through the Smales' absurdity of existence and Maureen's quest for the significance of existence. As a dystopian genre, *July's People* creates ideal conditions to examine existentialist concerns because it strips away stable social structures, therefore forcing characters like Maureen, Bam, and July to confront fundamental questions about meaning and identity. The novel shows that when Apartheid collapsed, characters could no longer rely on their predetermined roles. As a dystopian narrative, the novel also focuses on Apartheid as a power system denying authentic choices, which resonates with the existentialist emphasis on freedom and external determination. Still more important, both the philosophy of existentialism and dystopian narrative examine how individuals confront meaninglessness and construct authentic identity especially when belief systems and social structures collapse, urging as such characters to create meaning in the face of the absurd and oppressive conditions.

2. A Dystopian Exploration of Existence and Essence

The above title raises the question of how to explore Sartre's conception of "existence" and "essence" from a dystopian perspective, seeing that Gordimer's novel is a dystopian narrative that explores fundamental questions of existentialism. The dystopian narrative genre and the thematic perspective of existential crisis are fundamentally interconnected. The dystopian genre provides a fertile ground for exploring existentialist themes, especially within African literature, where themes related to existentialism, like identity, authenticity, and meaning, take on different dimensions as they are related to authoritarianism, oppression, and cultural disruption. Furthermore, African writers, like Nadine Gordimer, create a specific space where existentialist concerns are debated with a specific reference to historical trauma and socio-political contexts. Gordimer depicts a future in South Africa that is different from South Africa under Apartheid during the novel's publication (1981). Her depiction of unfamiliar situations is based on M. Keith Booker's notion of "defamiliarization":

The principal technique of dystopian fiction is defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable.²

Defamiliarization, in other words, involves presenting familiar situations in an unfamiliar way. Gordimer's projected dystopia in the future is based on the revolt of the black community and certain negative aspects related to the harsh situation of black people. Furthermore, she uses dystopian elements in her novel *July's People* to show the existence and essence of South African people within the post-Apartheid era. She examines how identity formation for white and black people equally is complicated by the prevailing power dynamics.

Essentially, she shows that the dystopian mode of her novel allows her to create a space to examine how the reversal in power structures in the post-Apartheid era continues to shape existential questions about one's being and becoming in society. Her dystopian vision draws heavily from South Africa's Apartheid legacy. The collapse of the Apartheid-established racial order through the Black Revolution against the White minority is more than a simple dystopian warning about the Black uprising, but rather a complex and deep exploration of existence under the inevitable consequences of sustained oppression. One factor that makes Gordimer's dystopian vision distinctive is her focus on the existential crisis that affects the upheaval's psychological and moral dimensions.

In his book entitled *Existentialism* (2006), Thomas Flynn states: "Existentialism had come of age, and its growing pains were being registered in novels and plays as well as in the press"³. Exploring the notions of "existence" and "essence" within Gordimer's dystopian novel captures a powerful examination of how dystopian literature examines fundamental principles of the philosophy of Existentialism. Essentially, Sartre argues that existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals are not born with a predetermined essence or purpose; instead, they create their essence through their choices and actions. This idea emphasizes personal responsibility and the freedom to shape one's identity.

According to Kia Hamid Yeganeh,

The existentialist slogan, "Existence precedes Essence", implies several vital consequences. Firstly, it suggests that we do not possess a predetermined nature or essence that governs our being, actions or what is valuable to us. Secondly, it highlights that we are free to act independently without external influences.

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Thirdly, it emphasizes that we create our human nature by exercising this freedom. Lastly, it asserts that our values are likewise constructed through these choices.⁴

In *July's People*, the collapse of the Apartheid system forces individuals to confront the reality of their true selves in both white and black communities. Maureen's family, living in Johannesburg, is previously shaped by racial and social hierarchies; the family members, however, lose the privileges and roles that, during Apartheid, defined their essence as white liberals; meanwhile, July has also to redefine his identity beyond being a servant to the white liberal family. The existence of the Smales as a white liberal family and of July as a black man consists of their factual being in their society, while their essence refers to their constructed identity after the collapse of Apartheid.

Concerning the notion of essence, the novel explores how this notion becomes something constructed rather than given. Maureen, Bam, and July's previous identities are revealed as contingent social constructs rather than innate qualities. Basically, Gordimer shows her exploration of identity formation within an existentialist dimension. For the white Smales family, their essence as privileged, educated, and professionals suddenly loses its foundation when they become dependent on July in his village. Once a significant sign of their social being and existence, their whiteness no longer favors automatic authority. Maureen cannot effectively play the role of a master over July in his community. Her identity as mistress of the household dissolves when she can no longer maintain white domestic standards. Even her husband, Bam, can no longer behave like a professional architect, seeing that his identity as an architect becomes meaningless in July's Black territory. Maureen and Bam's identities are highly positioned in society as the narrator states, "Maureen and Bam Smales. Bamford Smales, Smales, Caprano & Partners, Architects. Maureen Hetherington from Western Areas Gold Mines. Under 10s Silver Cup for Classical and Mime at the Johannesburg Eisteddfod"⁵ collapses in July's village and becomes a sort of what Sartre calls 'Nothingness'.

Similarly, July must reconstruct his essence, seeing that his identity as a Black man named July—instead of his true name, 'Mwawate'—is constructed by the white family he works for. His identity as a servant is revealed as circumstantial rather than intrinsic. His 'servant nature' was merely a performance necessitated by the power structure of Apartheid. This upheaval aligns with Sartre's famous sentence, "existence precedes essence". Gordimer's characters must create new meanings and identities through their actions and choices; they must create new identities that go

hand in hand with the post-Apartheid context. Their struggle illustrates the existential understanding that identity is not fixed but created through conscious choices in response to one’s situation, and that the environment where they live pushes them to reassess their values and beliefs, as Sartre argues, “man continually makes himself. Instead of being, he "has to be”⁶.

2.1. Gordimer’s Dystopian Exploration of Maureen’s Disrupted Existence

To begin with, through an existentialist lens, the existence of the Smales consists of their living as white South Africans with economic privilege and social status. Maureen and her husband Bamford are urban dwellers with professional careers—“Bam’s growing saving and investments, Maureen’s little legacy of De Beers shares her maternal grandfather had left her”⁷. In addition, they are employers who participate in the economic structures of Apartheid; they are self-identified liberals who intellectually oppose Apartheid but meanwhile benefit from it. As for the existence of the black servant, July is from a rural village and an economic migrant working in the Smales’ house to support his family; he is also a member of a colonized population navigating oppressive structures.

In the second place, the essence of these characters, as constructed identities, consists of their newly made identities, especially after the catastrophic collapse of the Apartheid. This transformation of essence is central to the novel's existentialist context. It captures an important existentialist dimension in Gordimer’s novel, seeing that the catastrophic collapse of Apartheid forces Maureen, Bam, and July to confront what Sartre calls the primacy of existence over essence. In this perspective, Maureen affirms the primary importance of her existence over essence, saying: “Well, you know the trouble there. It’s like a war. It’s a war. We could have been killed. The houses where we stayed ... they’ve been burned, bombed—some of them. People had to leave, our children might have been hurt.”⁸ Because of the Apartheid social order disintegration, Maureen can no longer derive her identity from the Apartheid predetermined racial roles as she experiences profound disorientation when stripped of her privileged position.

When the power dynamics of Apartheid dramatically crumble in the dystopian scenario of the novel, the white and black characters are compelled to forge new identities that go hand in hand with the emerging situation of post-Apartheid. For the Smales family, this complex attempt to reconstruct their existence and essence is apparent in their gradual adaption to a position of dependence rather than authority.

This is well illustrated when the narrator describes the village where Maureen and her family fled to:

She [Maureen] 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: Primus stove, left against the wall. The hen and chickens were moving there; (...) 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.⁹

After the dramatic collapse of Apartheid, Maureen and Bamford can no longer behave as masters of the black servant July; instead, they desperately flee to July’s house after the violent black riots in Johannesburg. In addition, the family faces a profound gap in the way of their existence in society: the gap between their liberal self-image and their actual behavior when privilege is removed. In this context, their newly reconstructed identity forces them to develop innovative ways to understand themselves without the privileges they previously enjoyed in the white community and without the crucial social markers of their whiteness and class.

Maureen’s disrupted existence can also be explained through the revolutionary setting of the novel and her character transformation. In fact, the novel's setting catalyzes this existentialist revelation. When Maureen shifts from suburban Johannesburg to July’s rural village, this dramatic change in the physical environment strips her of her previously defined identity. She left her comfortable house with its appliances, walls, and social boundaries—the foundations of the Smales’ identity—to hide in July’s hut. Her markers of status as defined by the Apartheid powerful structure becomes meaningless or nothing—to use Sartre’s word “nothingness”. A symbol of the Smales' decay of their formal identities is their car, which symbolizes mobility and independence. Once in the villages, it gradually sinks into mud—to illustrate the Smales' vanishing identity as privileged.

2.2. Physical Spaces and Existential Transformation

The setting transformation demonstrates how the Smales’ previous “essences” depend on specific and predefined social and physical environments rather than inherent qualities. Again, this situation illustrates Sartre’s notion of “being and nothingness”. In their Johannesburg life, the Smales existed in what Sartre calls “being-in-itself”¹⁰; they appeared to have stable identities as liberal white South African people defined by their professions, possessions, and racial privilege. Their comfortable home, Bam’s profession as an architect, Maureen’s role as a household

manager, and their relationship with July as employers—all these aspects constituted who they are. However, the reversal in power dynamics and the revolutionary displacement shatters this illusion. When reterritorialized in July's community, their identities' material and social foundations disintegrate. They feel useless without their professions: Maureen's identity as "madam" collapses, and Bam's professional career as an architect becomes meaningless. Most fundamentally, their whiteness—the core stone of their being—no longer identifies them with the automatic authority of privilege.

This transformation illustrates what Sartre calls "nothingness"¹¹, a notion at the core of human existence. Maureen discovers that she is not essentially anything, seeing that her previous identity as a privileged white liberal woman is not inherent but rather a contingent construction dependent on specific social structures and physical environment. Now that she no longer possesses any comfortable material, she must create a new territory through choices and actions in July's unfamiliar environment.

Maureen's existence in July's village is passive; Sartre calls it "passive existence; that is, an existence which perpetuates itself without having the force either to produce itself or to preserve itself."¹² Maureen cannot produce a new self again as she already existed in Johannesburg, within the boundaries of a white liberal family, nor can she preserve herself as the privileged 'madam' Maureen. For instance, she cannot master basic survival skills like carrying water on her head or cooking over fire, as do the black women in the village. This passive existence is physical and, more importantly, existential. She lacks the force to start a new life and to adapt to the rural village; she cannot create a new identity within this new context. She lives in the village without purpose, increasingly detached from her husband and children. Even her movement in the village is done fearfully, as the narrator states:

Maureen could not walk out into the boundlessness. Not so far as to take the dog around the block or to the box to post a letter. She could go to the river but no farther and not often. When she did go she did so believing it better not to go at all than risk being seen, now.¹³

Unlike July, who is detached from the life he used to live in Johannesburg and who could reintegrate easily into his black community, Maureen could not generate a new authentic mode of being. She cannot bear the responsibility of self-recreation.

From this perspective, we may ask: Why is July’s existence different from Maureen’s, though he—like her—has also been deterritorialized from the white to the black community? In other words, what distinguished July’s existence from Maureen’s, even though he—like her—has moved from the white to the black community?

2.3. July’s Awakening: An Existential Confrontation with Change

How July profoundly reconstructs his self-image after the reversal in the power dynamics of Apartheid involves a great awakening, which represents one of Gordimer’s compelling portrayals of an existential confrontation with change within a dystopian setting. July’s reconstruction of self-identity does not happen as a sudden decision but unfolds gradually as power dynamics shift.

A good example of July’s shift in attitudes towards himself and the Smales involves his courageous reclaiming of his authentic name, “Mwawate”: “Of course, ‘July’ was a name for whites to use; for fifteen years they had not been told what the chiefs subject really was called.”¹⁴ In this context, July’s reclamation of his authentic name symbolizes a fundamental shift in self-definition. As the previous quote indicates, the name ‘July’ is arbitrarily imposed by the white family because they find his authentic name ‘Mwawate’ difficult to pronounce—a subtle but significant erasure of identity. July’s beginning to have his authentic name used symbolically marks a rejection of Apartheid naming and a powerful reassertion of cultural authenticity.

Through July’s character, Gordimer illustrates an important aspect of the crisis of existentialism and the complexity of existence when historical circumstances change. In fact, through July’s characterization, Gordimer asserts that the political transformation necessarily involves an existential transformation, changing not only external circumstances, namely the reversal in power dynamics between the whites and the blacks, but also the very way individuals like July and Maureen understand themselves and their place in society. In other words, to link this to the dystopian narrative genre, Gordimer’s portrayal of white and black characters’ existential transformations connects powerfully to central themes in African dystopian literature, illustrating the way her dystopian novel explores the political upheaval of the Apartheid segregating regime which forces characters to confront complex changes in power dynamics and to reconstruct their identities in the light of the emerging forces in society. As in dystopian literature, *July’s People* asserts that characters must navigate the collapse of established social orders, like the Apartheid,

requiring them to fundamentally reconstruct their identities after being stripped of familiar societal definitions.

To answer the previous question—what distinguished July’s existence from Maureen’s, even though he—like her—has moved from the white to the black community?—it is crucial to consider the fact that July and Maureen have different reactions towards their deterritorialization from the white community; they have different relationships as regards the space they are navigating. In this respect, highlighting the spatial dimension of July and Maureen’s contrasting existential responses is very important. Their different relationship to physical and social space shapes their ability to reconstruct authentic identities during the revolutionary upheaval of Apartheid. July’s deterritorialization from white Johannesburg to his black community represents a return to a familiar territory where he possesses social standing and legitimate authority. His physical movement to the village he belongs to goes hand in hand with his return to spaces where his *being for itself* can align more authentically with his *being for others*.

Conversely, Maureen experiences deterritorialization without any corresponding reterritorialization, which captures her existential crisis. Drawing from Deleuze’s assumption about “the deterritorializing role of contemporary dystopia”¹⁵, we notice that contemporary dystopia for Deleuze functions by disrupting established connections between individuals and their physical/social territories—a process he calls deterritorialization. Maureen’s experience represents a complete severing of previous connections without forming new connections. Her identity and her being as a liberal white South African woman becomes what Sartre calls “nothingness” in July’s village, a fact that leaves her in an existential vacuum.

The village where Maureen flees with her family represents a barrier in front of her. In addition, the complete deterritorialization she experiences represents a complete uprooting with no possibility of establishing new roots.

As for July, he does not experience what Maureen goes through; his movement from the white to the black community represents a return to a space where he authentically belongs. Unlike Maureen’s, his deterritorialization is a form of reterritorialization, especially as he reclaims his position as a respected community member, husband, and father. Furthermore, July’s years of working in Maureen’s white society required him to develop skills in managing dual consciousness: he can maintain awareness of both his ‘being-for-self’ and ‘being-for-others’, meaning his authentic self in his village and his performed role as a servant.

However, such a reconstruction is not easily achieved in the light of the complexity of the existential transformations because the collapse follows the collapse in Apartheid social orders in the socially constructed identities: Maureen is no longer that white superior master; July is no longer that black obedient inferior submissive servant. The reversal in power dynamics creates an altered society, giving rise to a crisis in existence and essence.

3. The Crisis of Existence in Altered Societies

The altered society in *July's People* portrays a significant crisis of existence. In other words, the novel presents a profound existential crisis for white and black characters because of the dramatic reversal of social orders. This existential crisis operates on various levels; we focus on Maureen and July as significant examples from white and black communities. Gordimer's dystopian mode demonstrates how African literature is powerful in exploring existentialist questions; in other words, her dystopian approach reveals how African literature offers uniquely powerful explorations of existentialist questions.

3.1. Maureen's Psychological Crisis in Search for Meaning

For the Smales, the crisis in existence is remarkable after their desperate displacement from the white to the black community. Maureen, in particular, has lost the privileges and material comforts that previously defined their existence. Stripped of the material that provided her family with a luxurious and comfortable life, Maureen can hardly live without these markers of status in July's village; she struggles to understand who she is, who her family is, and how to function in a black community where her whiteness no longer conforms to any advantage.

In this respect, Gordimer pushes this existential crisis to a psychological dimension when displacing the Smales from urban Johannesburg to July's village; as such, she reflects the psychological displacement of the family, which creates their existential crisis in a world that is not theirs and to which they can hardly adapt. The unfamiliar setting of the village intensifies the Smales' sense of not belonging, alienation, and disorientation, which creates a gap of existential uncertainty, as the narrator states: "Maureen was aware, among them in the hut, of not knowing where she was, in time, in the order of a day as she had always known it."¹⁶ In addition, the last scene in the novel, where Maureen runs towards an approaching helicopter without knowing anything about it, powerfully symbolizes this existential uncertainty. Maureen prefers to flee to an unknown destination rather than endure life in July's black community.

We can say that genuine social transformations inevitably lead to existential crises, especially when the reversal of societal role structures greatly impacts all individuals. Through the dystopian narrative genre—which basically explores societies in fundamental transition and where established power structures collapse or are dramatically reconfigured—Gordimer powerfully illustrates this idea. She uses dystopian elements—violent upheaval, inversion of power structures, and displacement from familiar to unfamiliar environments—not only as a political warning but also as a philosophical device that explores the struggle for existence within such harsh conditions. The reversed power dynamics between the black servant July and the white liberal Smales reveal how identities previously assumed to be natural or inherent depended on specific social arrangements.

Gordimer’s approach to existentialism in a dystopian context is important because she does not present a simplistic reversal of power dynamics where the oppressors become oppressed—as is the case with the Smales. Instead, she explores the psychological and philosophical terrain that emerges when established meanings collapse. This ambiguity aligns with the dystopian traditions that go beyond cautionary tales to probe fundamental questions about human nature and the crisis of existence. As already stated previously, Maureen’s psychological crisis stems basically from her deterritorialization from the white to the black community; in other words, Maureen embodies the conflict between her ‘Being’ and her ‘Nothingness’—to use Sartre’s words—and this is a central existential dynamic aspect in her character. In Johannesburg, she feels herself having a complete “being”; whereas in July’s black community, she feels herself as “nothingness”. She embodies the Sartrean notion of the conflict between Being and Nothingness; her crisis emerges from her confrontation with the “nothingness” that has always existed at the core of her “being” but was hidden by the Apartheid’s social structures.

3.2. A Groundless Being: Maureen’s Loss of Existential Foundations

An important quote from the novel captures the collapse of Maureen’s social self:

But the transport of a novel, the false awareness of being within another time, place and life that was the pleasure of reading, for her, was not possible. She was in another time, place, and consciousness; it pressed in upon her and filled her as someone’s breath fills a balloon’s shape. She was already not what she was.¹⁷

This passage uses the metaphor of reading a novel—typically an escape into another consciousness—to highlight that Maureen can no longer distinguish between the novel’s fictional transportation and her disoriented state of being. In other words,

unlike reading a novel where one temporarily inhabits another consciousness before returning to one's own, Maureen can no longer find her way back to her previous self in the white community. The pleasure of temporary transportation, as in reading a novel, has been replaced by the terror of permanent displacement. In this case, Maureen is neither her former nor a coherently new self but a self in a disorienting transition. Maureen's psychological, existential crisis is not simply adapting to a physical environment but coping with the more profound challenge of existing without a stable identity when all the contextual supports for that identity have been stripped away.

Furthermore, this quote is particularly revealing because it shows Maureen's loss of self-continuity. The statement "She was already not what she was" reveals the Sartrean concept of "Nothingness" at the core of Maureen's existence: her former identity has dissolved, yet no new identity has taken its place—she exists in between a lost past and an uncertain future. In addition, the narrator's reference to a balloon is another metaphor that suggests that Maureen's consciousness has become passive because, from the outside, it is shaped by circumstances rather than defined through her agency.

Still more important, the revolutionary displacement strips away Maureen's supporting structures, encountering what Sartre calls "vertigo,"¹⁸ meaning anguish: "my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my reactions in that situation."¹⁹ In the same perspective, as the novel progresses, we observe that Maureen's being in the black community provokes vertigo/anguish to the extent that she distrusts herself and her reactions. Her experience in July's village creates profound vertigo precisely because she finds herself "living a life that was already over"²⁰—existing in a liminal space between her collapsed past identity and an unformed future self. It is this liminality which is the source of her vertigo/anguish. For example, when she tries to exercise authority over July, she simultaneously recognizes the hollowness of her assertions. She often refuses July's service; her recurrent sentence, "I can do it myself,"²¹ reveals her complex and contradictory response to her changed circumstances. On the surface, it appears a rejection of privilege—she refuses to exploit July's family within their community. However, by refusing this exploitation, Maureen attempts to establish a new identity distinct from her former role as "madam". However, this refusal again paradoxically reinforces her separation from the Black community rather than integrating her within it. In this context, her insistence on self-sufficiency becomes a form of isolation and alienation.

4. CONCLUSION

Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* offers a profound exploration of Sartre’s philosophy of Existentialism within a dystopian context, revealing how the collapse of the Apartheid system forces white and black South African people to confront existential crises about their true being in society. The novel demonstrates how dystopian settings can function as powerful vehicles that reflect existentialist struggles by reversing power dynamics. Moreover, Gordimer’s dystopian novel operates as an existential catalyst focusing on racialized existentialism. It extends Sartre’s concepts by showing how racial power structures fundamentally shape the possibilities for authentic existence, revealing that characters can no longer hide behind predefined roles. Furthermore, Gordimer shows the South African existential crisis as political in that she transcends the existential crisis emerging from abstract philosophical questioning to emerging from concrete social revolution, linking such personal authenticity to political transformation. Within this context, Gordimer demonstrates that colonial history creates layers of bad faith unique to postcolonial contexts, which force characters to confront not only personal self-deception but also historically constructed systems of racial self-deception, and expending as such the existentialist understanding of how historical forces—as the reversal in the Apartheid power dynamics—shape authenticity. Eventually, Gordimer’s dystopian narrative perspective enriches the existentialist philosophy by grounding abstract concepts within the South African historical reality, showing how authentic existence must include confronting one’s position within systems of racial power.

5. Citations

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, (1943), *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (1956), Pocket Books, New York, p.lvi.

² M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, Greenwood Press, 1994, p.19.

³ Thomas Flynn, *Existentialism*, Sterling Publishing, New York, 2006, p.120.

⁴ K.H Yeganeh, *An analysis of the congruence between the tenets of Sartre’s existentialism and Inglehart’s modern cultural values*. *Social Issues*, 3(1), 2025, p.6.

⁵ Nadine Gordimer, *July’s People*, Bloomsbury, United Kingdom, 1981, p.7.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, (1943), *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (1956), Pocket Books, New York, p.xix

⁷ Nadine Gordimer, *July’s People*, Bloomsbury, United Kingdom, 1981, p.6.

⁸ *The same source*, p.135.

⁹ *The same source*, pp.4-5.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, (1943), *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, (1956), Pocket Books, New York, p.lxiii.

¹¹ The same source, p.xix.

¹² The same source, p.Ivi

¹³ Nadine Gordimer, *July's People*, Bloomsbury, United Kingdom, 1981, p.25.

¹⁴ The same source, p.95.

¹⁵ Rahime Çokay Nebioğlu, *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Dystopia*, Palgrave, Ankara, 2020, p.11.

¹⁶ Nadine Gordimer, *July's People*, Bloomsbury, United Kingdom, 1981, p.18.

¹⁷ The same source, p.26.

¹⁸ J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.29.

¹⁹ The same source, p. 29.

²⁰ Nadine Gordimer, *July's People*, Bloomsbury, United Kingdom, 1981, p.114.

²¹ The same source, p.25.

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4. Nebioğlu Rahime Çokay, (2020), *Deleuze and the Schizoanalysis of Dystopia*, Palgrave, Ankara
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