

From SELECTED ESSAYS: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE on
REPRESENTING REVOLUTION 1989. ED. JOHN MICHAEL
CRAFTON. CARROLLTON, GA: WEST GEORGIA
COLLEGE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, 1991.
115-27.

Women and Revolution in Dystopian Fiction:
Nadine Gordimer's
July's People and Margaret Atwood's *The*
Handmaid's Tale

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Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are both dystopias, nightmare visions of the future. Both of the worlds depicted come into being because of revolutionary coups. However, in both cases, the revolutions were in progress long before the actual takeovers, and there were opportunities for citizens to have prevented these dystopian situations from coming to pass. Yet, because changing the direction of political events requires energy, solidarity, bravery or at least some self-sacrifice, most citizens are reluctant to become involved. Nadine Gordimer and Margaret Atwood understand this attitude because they have felt that way too. Both claim they are not by nature drawn to politics. Indeed, each would prefer the luxury of being a personal, apolitical writer; yet both find they have no choice but to write novels in which the personal and the political are inseparably intertwined ("Nadine Gordimer: An Interview" 18; Atwood, "Evading" 536). Similarly, their dystopian visions, the products of their insights, suggest that we readers should also recognize that, whether or not we acknowledge it, the personal is political. We cannot afford the luxury of believing that we can ignore the political—which means, in Atwood's words, "who's got the power and how did they get it, and how do they maintain it, and who is it power over and what is it power to do?" (Van Gelder 90). To remain disengaged from politics is also political, for it is an endorsement of whatever is happening. If we do not make sacrifices now, we may be obliged to make even greater sacrifices later. As women writers deeply concerned about human rights, Gordimer and Atwood focus our attention, in particular, upon the sacrifices the revolutionary coups force upon their female protagonists. In *July's People*, the coup, although provoked initially by Rightist politics, comes from the Left. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the coup comes from the religious Right. Whether the revolutions come from the Left or the Right, the female protagonists are far worse off than before. Because of these political upheavals, they lose whatever power or happiness they once had.

When Margaret Atwood read *July's People* in 1981, her last novel *Bodily Harm* (1982) was undoubtedly in press. Reading "the astonishing Nadine Gordimer" in 1981 seemingly contributed to the conception of her next novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which, like *July's People*, is a dystopian vision of life after a revolution. Atwood obviously liked Gordimer's *July's People* very much, calling it "beautifully shaped, powerful in its impact" (*Second Words* 363, 365). In her review of this novel Atwood wrote: "In less skilled hands this could have become a self-righteous and potentially malicious

cautionary tale, of the 'Look what's going to happen to you' variety" (*Second Words* 365). Instead, for many of Gordimer's admirers, it is her most appealing book. Similarly, when Atwood's own dystopia was published, she worried that people would dismiss it "as a piece of paranoia" (Van Gelder 49). Instead, *The Handmaid's Tale* was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for six months (Peri 30).

Gordimer's novel, *July's People*, is about what happens when the black majority in South Africa seizes power, causing unprepared white liberals like Bam and Maureen Smales to flee. The Smales are saved by their black servant July, who leads them through the bush to hide in his village. Once there, the servant gradually assumes the role of master until Bam and Maureen are totally dependent upon his good will. Through this reversal of roles and through trying to adjust to July's rural culture, the Smales finally gain some insight into what July had experienced as their dependent in a white, urban setting. Speaking bitterly, July summed it up for Maureen with these words:

Fifteen years
your boy
you satisfy (98).

Their situations reversed, it is now Bam and Maureen who are virtually powerless. It is they who do not understand the language or the customs. It is they who lack the survival skills in *his* environment. It is they who must ask *him* for every little thing they need. It is now they who have no police protection.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is about a woman trying to survive psychologically under an oppressive, authoritarian regime, created by religious fundamentalists. All women had lost control over their lives when, in a single day, they were *en masse* cut off from their totally computerized bank accounts and released from their jobs. By this time, pollution and radioactivity have lowered the birth rate and increased the number of deformed babies, making fertile women a scarcity. Hence, male control of female reproduction has once again become a high priority in this area of the United States now called Gilead. The religious Right has solved the problem of infertility by using the Bible to condone the use of Handmaids by the male elite. In Genesis 30:3, Rachel, unable to bear a child, tells Jacob: "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." In *The Handmaid's Tale*, at a formal ceremony

attended by the entire household, Offred, the female protagonist, is situated between the Wife's legs to receive the Commander (120-23). That he might be the cause of infertility is never acknowledged, and unless Offred can secretly become pregnant with the help of someone else, she will be blamed. Offred must bear a child within three years; otherwise, she will be sent to the colonies to help clean up radioactive material and, through doing so, will die soon afterwards. Offred is only one of several females that Fred, her Commander, has in his household to serve him. Color-coded according to their specialized role, the protagonist, his Handmaid whose name means Of Fred, wears red for blood and birth, his Wife (Serena Joy, a former evangelist singer) wears blue, his Marthas (who do housework) wear green. For men as well as women in this society, sexual activity, talk, and mobility are strictly controlled. Based upon sexism and misogyny, this culture does not allow women to read or write. One of the masterminds behind the Gilead's techniques for social repression, B. Frederick Judd, was credited with this remark about women: "Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again" (389).

Both Margaret Atwood and Nadine Gordimer are active in P.E.N., an international organization that struggles against repression. It strives to protect the freedom of expression as well as the physical freedom of writers throughout the world. In 1987, Atwood was President of the English-speaking division of the Canadian branch of P.E.N. (Van Gelder 90), and Nadine Gordimer has been Vice President of the international P.E.N. (Berkley 80) and a leader within the branch of P.E.N. in Johannesburg ("Nadine Gordimer" by Johannes Riis 22). In a 1981 speech for Amnesty International, Atwood said: "Powerlessness and silence go together; one of the first efforts made in any totalitarian takeover is to suppress the writers, the singers, the journalists, those who are the collective voice." She went on to say: "there is really only one war, that between those who would like the future to be . . . a boot grinding forever into a human face, and those who would like it to be a state of something we still dream of as freedom" (396).

Oppression, as Atwood defines it, caused the two dystopias, Gordimer's and hers, to come into existence: "Oppression involves the failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings" (397). Because of that "failure of imagination" on the part of racist white South Africans, *July's People* presents, as Stephen Clingman says, "a world turned upside down for everyone—black and white included" (198). In addition to exploding the master/servant and male/female roles, in this

novel Gordimer explodes "the liberal myth of reconciliation." The conservative white South Africans have allowed apartheid to continue until the bitterness explodes into violence, and "there can be no reconciliation between masters and servants, no 'saviours,' miracles, moment of mutual recognition and forgiveness, or easy way out" (Clingman 203). In the words of Margaret Atwood: "*July's People* is not concerned with villains and heroes but with the depiction of a next-to-impossible situation" ("*July's People*" 365). Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the lives of all the characters, whatever their status, are miserable. In contrast to what the Christian hymn promises, there is no balm in this Gilead. The privileged Commander's life has not much more freedom or pleasure in it than the Handmaid's. The nightmare existence envelops the oppressor as well as the oppressed. Fear and distrust poison the lives of all the citizens.

Although *July's People* takes place in the future, Nadine Gordimer denied in an interview that she was "playing with the future" in writing that book. She said that she was "playing with the present, looking at what we were doing in South Africa that could very well bring about that kind of consequence." She continued with these words: "In the few years since it was written . . . many of the things which seemed like science fiction *then*, have begun to happen, and it's not because I'm a seer or prophet, but because it was there. We'd been doing things that would bring this about" ("A Voice from a Troubled Land" 10). Indeed, she can see the revolution in the present because it is already happening. In 1981, she clarified to Stephen Gray in an interview that the revolution in South Africa "started a long time ago, at least in the sixties, if not the fifties, and we go from phase to phase inexorably" ("An Interview with Nadine Gordimer" 268). Margaret Atwood said the same about what she wrote in *The Handmaid's Tale*; as far-fetched as the details might seem, she described nothing that had "not already happened, somewhere, sometime" (Nischik 147). In a 1985 interview in *Quill & Quire*, Atwood described her novel as a "collective nightmare, and the thing about writing it out is that then you can see it. You can see where this or that might lead. I think that's the reason why we write such books. This is a pretty crucial time, and the way women are treated in a society determines the shape of the society. It determines to a great extent what choices are available to men as well" (67).

Both Nadine Gordimer and Margaret Atwood admit to writing political novels, not because they want to be didactic but because the message is inherent in the content. Gordimer said in a 1984 interview with Marilyn

Powell: "I'm not a propagandist, not a politician; I'm an imaginative writer, but I take my material . . . from the world I know around me, and it is an intensely political world, and I don't close my eyes to anything that I see there. So if there is a message it comes out of the content. It is not a message dictated by me. It is a message carried in the lives of people there and the way they are lived, in their actions—it's implicit, in other words" (18). Atwood made a similar statement in an interview with Lindsay Van Gelder: "I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me" (90).

But why did Atwood, a Canadian, write about threats to freedom in the American culture? She probably chose this topic for the same reason she wrote *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* back in 1972—because no one else had done it (*Second Words* 385). And why, as a Canadian, does she know so much about American culture? She explains that Canadians watch American culture "the way the maid knows what's in the master's bureau drawers, but the master has no interest in what's in the maid's bureau" (Van Gelder 50). The master/servant relationship, the dominance/submission pattern, exists between countries as well as in the home or in the workplace. Sensitivity to the question of power—an awareness of who has it and why—infuses her work just as it does Nadine Gordimer's.

Atwood and Gordimer do not exclude the victimization of men and concerns about other issues; yet both chose to have a female and her special concerns at the centers of their nightmare visions. Atwood's focus in *The Handmaid's Tale* is upon the dominance/submission pattern of relationships between males and females. Yet she, like Nadine Gordimer, dislikes labels and wants feminism carefully defined before allowing herself to be described as a feminist. Atwood's protagonist is similarly cautious, because her mother, an ardent feminist, made alliances with her current enemy, the religious Right, on the antipornography issue; she even burned magazines in the public square. Offred recalls going to the park with her mother to burn magazines. On one was a "pretty woman . . . with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands." Helping the adults, she had tossed a magazine into the flames: "it riffled open in the wind of its burning: big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes" (51). However objectionable these magazines were, her mother had been naive to have formed alliances with the religious Right. The Rightists had ended

pornography, but they had also ended the publication of all magazines; they had ended the whistles on the street, but they also denied citizens the right to look at or speak to each other; they had made the streets safe for women, but they also denied the Handmaids the right to go out alone ever.

Deprived of freedom, Margaret Atwood's protagonist slowly becomes rebellious. What she longs for most is "to be held and told [her] name" (125). Offred asserts that "nobody dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from" (128). She begins a secret affair with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, initially with the hope of getting pregnant and then "because *she* wanted it." She is happy, because "I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known" (347). Initially, she had longed for tools of self-destruction—knives, shearers, chandeliers, toilet parts, matches. Lacking that, she held onto her sanity by repeating a saying the last Handmaid had written in her closet: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum," a school boy's fake Latin for "Don't let the bastards grind you down" (241-42). Finally, her rebellion takes the form of telling her story orally inside her mind and, after her escape, recording it on tapes.

Like a writer, she experiences both the limitations and the power of the Word. How can she express what has happened to her? She struggles with different versions of the truth. She becomes playful: "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it" (52). Furthermore, if it is a story she is telling, then she must have an audience. She says: "A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to a world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one" (53). She realizes that she has a choice. She could refrain from telling her story. But she chooses to tell it. Moreover, "by telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (344). Through words, she has some choice, some power, some hope, for communication. To tell her story is to have hope, to have faith. To tell her story is an act of defiance, for she is not allowed to tell it. She is expected to be silent and, hence, powerless.

Although Margaret Atwood's protagonist has rebelled against her feminist mother, she admires women, like her friend Moira, who are spunky and rebellious. Offred declares of Moira: "I don't want her to be like me. Give

in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack" (324). She wished she had a good final story of what had happened to her friend Moira: "I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her" (325). But Offred never did hear what happened to Moira.

Like Offred, Nadine Gordimer's protagonist Maureen Smales is not by nature a rebel. However, in order to save herself, she is driven to abandon her husband and children. Several critics suggest that Maureen is, therefore, a feminist. She sheds her roles of good wife and mother; she decides to be selfish, to think only of her own survival. At the end of the story, "she runs: trusting herself with all the suppressed trust of a lifetime, alert, like a solitary animal when animals neither seek a mate nor take care of young, existing only for their lone survival, the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility" (160). Moreover, in her run to meet the helicopter that is landing, she "moves out into the water [of a river] like some member of a baptismal sect to be born again" (159). Certainly, she has been transformed by the dire circumstances in which she has found herself. But is her transformation into a feminist? I think not.

The words "master bedroom" echo throughout *July's People*, and those words are a key to Maureen Smales' view of her husband. What she had lost in the revolution was the "master bedroom" and all that it signified to her. Most of all, it represents economic standing and the kind of love, privacy, and communication that luxury can offer. Bam loses his manhood when he no longer can provide the master bedroom and especially the "credit card and cheque-book" that go with it (59). When, in addition, he loses his vehicle and his gun, he also loses her. To lie down in the hut is to become "a trampoline for fleas" (89), so obviously Bam can no longer provide for her. Maureen responds to her husband's inability to be her protector and provider the same way Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* responds to Torvald's unwillingness to protect her in a crisis. Neither woman is willing to continue playing her roles if the husband is unable or unwilling to play his. In short, the dominance/submission game she and Bam had been playing is over, and like Nora, she leaves. Her husband was "behind in the master bedroom: what was here, with her, was some botched imagining of his presence in circumstances outside those the marriage was contracted for" (98).

But here the parallel with Nora Helmer ends, for Maureen's solution to the breakdown of the marriage contract is not to fend for herself but to turn to another man. Her defensive response was to switch to her new master, July. Realizing that Bam could not locate bricks for her, "She found her own solution—Ask July" (55). However, July rejects both her offer of submission (101) and her offer of equality. She had deprived him of his manhood and his dignity for fifteen years. He could not forgive that. He tells her: "I'm big man, I know for myself what I must do. I'm not thinking all the time for your things, your dog, your cat" (71). Bam is ineffectual, and July is unwilling to accept a closer relationship with her. Her only recourse is to run—but to run where?

The sexual elements in the description of the helicopter that lands near July's village are extremely important, yet critics have ignored them. What draws Maureen toward the helicopter is what it symbolizes—virility, power, and sexuality: "A high ringing is produced in her ears, *her body* in its rib-cage is thudded with deafening vibration, *invaded by a force pumping, jiggling in its monstrous orgasm*—the helicopter has sprung through the hot brilliant cloud just above them all, *its landing gear like spread legs*, battling the air with whirling scythes" ([italics mine] 158). No one knows who is in the helicopter. Maureen tries to see its markings but knows that even could she identify those markings, she would not know whether the vehicle held "saviours or murderers" (158). The people most likely to be landing there are the black revolutionaries. But without waiting to see or to consider the consequences, in desperation, she runs directly to where the helicopter has landed. As she runs, we are told that "the real fantasies of the bush delude more inventively than the romantic forests of Grimm and Disney. The smell of boiled potatoes (from a vine indistinguishable to her from others) promises a kitchen, a house just the other side of the next tree" (160).

Offred's longings are just as domestic as Maureen's. Is it just a coincidence that Atwood's protagonist, like Gordimer's, longs for a kitchen? As Offred walks through Fred's kitchen where the Marthas are at work, the smell of yeast makes her yearn for "other kitchens, kitchens that were mine." Offred decides that the kitchen "smells of mothers" (62). Undoubtedly influenced by her reading of *July's People*, Atwood mentions in *The Handmaid's Tale* not only the longing for the kitchen but also the meaning of the "master bedroom." When another Handmaid, Ofwarren, is about to give birth, Offred notes that the birth will take place in the "master bedroom." She considers the term and adds, "the master bedroom, a good name for it; where

this Commander and his Wife nightly bed down." Ofwarren, whose real name is Janine, is "sitting on their king-size bed, propped with pillows." In witty Atwood fashion, she notes that the still pregnant Janine is "inflated but reduced, shorn of her former name" (150). The "master bedroom" is an important symbol of patriarchal power. Both Offred and Maureen are well aware of that.

Maureen may exhibit all the outward signs of what an antifeminist or uninformed critic might imagine a feminist to be—a selfish female who deserts her family. But Maureen's impulsive attempt to escape is more likely to be self-destructive than liberating. The people most likely to exit from the helicopter are black revolutionaries who, under the duress of a revolution, would be more likely to rape and/or kill her than rescue and protect her. They are not very likely to satisfy her dreams of a kitchen in a house with a new master bedroom.

In Nadine Gordimer's next novel, *A Sport of Nature*, the protagonist, Hillela, does mate with a black revolutionary and bear his children. As Gordimer seems to suggest, that is one way out of an impossible racial conflict. However, it is not likely to happen at this time in this place for Maureen. Moreover, exchanging one master bedroom for another may be the solution Maureen subconsciously longs for, but critics are wrong to call it feminist.

Offred's solution is more feminist, as she courageously tapes her story over "Elvis Presley's Golden Years," "Folk Songs of Lithuania" (presumed home of Gordimer's ancestors), "Boy George Takes It Off," "Mantovani's Mellow Strings," and a single entitled "Twisted Sister at Carnegie Hall" (382). Such tapes dated from before all such music was banned during the Gilead regime. Offred had made a total of thirty tapes for historians to read. To do these recordings, Offred had first to escape. Her escape from her Commander's home resembles, in kind, that of Maureen from July's village. Again the influence of Gordimer's novel on Atwood is obvious. Offred, like Maureen, goes willingly towards a vehicle (in this case, a black van) that could contain "saviours or murderers." In it, she could find either Eyes, the guardians who seek out subversives, or members of the resistance movement called Mayday. By going to the van, Offred takes the same kind of risk that Maureen does in *July's People*. But the odds of meeting "saviours" are more in Offred's favor than they were in Maureen's. Offred's lover, Nick, has assured her that those in the van are from Mayday (from the French "m'aidez"). However, despite his earnest appeal, "Trust me," she still

suspects he may be one of the Eyes (376). Yet, he is more likely than not to be telling the truth. Ultimately, because her tapes were found in Maine, we assume she was rescued rather than killed.

Maureen may well be killed, because in a racial conflict racism on one side is likely to breed racism on the other. The racism in South Africa is likely to live on on both sides, nurtured by social, economic, and psychological violence as well as the physical violence of the revolution. In contrast, Offred survives physically, but the sexism of the historians who find and study her tapes will silence her story as effectively as death might have. These scholars, repeating the errors of the past, mistakenly believe that they are objective. They also refuse to pass moral judgment on the regime in Gilead.

What we read at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a "partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies" held on June 25, 2195. This section of the novel is extremely important for revealing the complicity of scholars in the maintenance of patriarchal attitudes; yet it has been largely ignored by critics. The keynote speaker, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, begins with a sexist joke about three ways of enjoying the female chair of the session. He continues to provoke laughter by explaining that the title, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was added to the transcript by Professor Wade, "partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer" and hence "all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats" (381). The discussion that follows focuses not upon analyzing what had happened to Offred but instead upon identifying the name of Offred's Commander! Moreover, these historians express admiration for those who masterminded Gilead's system for controlling its population: they had "considerable ingenuity" and some "brilliant" ideas (391). The keynote speaker claims "there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis" (389). Many details are discussed but the important content of the Handmaid's story and what it indicated about human behavior are ignored. Therefore, sexism continues, and a new version of the Gilead regime could develop in the future.

Hence, Gordimer and Atwood tell cautionary tales with some hope, but not much, that racism and sexism can be overcome and regimes based upon them avoided. Such regimes come about, as Barbara Rigney says in her book on Atwood, by "not paying attention" and "the price exacted is a loss of freedom" (113). In a conversation with American students in 1987,

Margaret Atwood gave them this advice: "Any encroachment on freedom of speech, freedom to publish, freedom to say what you think should be stopped immediately because lights are going out all over the world" (238). She tells them to go back to the 1776 American Revolution and "look at your Constitution—keep that firmly in mind and ask yourself, is somebody trying to violate this; is somebody trying to overturn this? Is some kind of monopoly being established?" (239). Both Nadine Gordimer and Margaret Atwood have devoted much of their preciously-guarded time to well-known organizations dedicated to preserving human rights. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects the influence of Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*. The two authors share a strong conviction that we must place a high priority on preserving every citizen's personal and political freedom. We must "pay attention," or their dystopian visions will be the nightmares we live.

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