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"Imagine Someone Speaking as They Speak": Linguistic Divide and Convoluted Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nadine Gordimer's Apartheid-Era Work

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Introduction

Nadine Gordimer's delicate, perceptive, and oftentimes idiosyncratic treatment of controversial issues has received a lot of critical enquiry. Scant attention, however, has been paid to how Gordimer's critical appraisal of apartheid policies emerges from her attempt to concretely embody African languages, discourses, and cultures in her fiction. This essay, therefore, revisits Gordimer's apartheid-era fiction to examine how the representation of a range of discourses in Gordimer's fiction constitutes a means through which she appraises apartheid power relations and the effects of divisive policies. The paper argues that Gordimer's treatise on apartheid and its divisive policies is manifested in her attempt to embody African discourses in her apartheid-era fiction. In this paper, I rely on Foucault's definition of discourse as "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them . . . [d]iscourses [that] are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. . . . They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern" (qtd. in Weedon 108). They are also "a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance" (qtd. in Diamond and Quinby 185). Both of these definitions refer to discourse not as an innocent act, but one that conditions subjects in their social, cultural and economic interactions.

To present my argument, I use as examples three of Gordimer's novels written at different points in the apartheid-era: her debut novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), her sixth, *The Conservationist* (1972), and *July's People* (1981), the eighth of her nine apartheid-era novels. Part of the reason for focusing on her novels rather than her numerous short stories is personal preference, though as André Brink notes in "The Language of the Novel," "The remarkable shifts in language theory in the twentieth century made it possible for the novel to dramatise and exploit its relationship with language much more self-consciously than ever before" (8).

The choice of three apartheid-era novels representing different times of Gordimer's long literary career can also partly be justified by Stephen Clingman's observation:

> Each shift of consciousness in Nadine Gordimer's fiction is made in response to external developments and to the way in which these clarify the weaknesses of earlier positions; each therefore bears some significant relationship to South African historical development as a whole . . . [T]his relationship is mediated at each point by the determinations of her social and ideological position, and in that the response of each novel emanates from such a position, the historical consciousness each manifests may be used as representative: of the class of people to whose understanding, options, and choices it corresponds, at each particular juncture. ("History from the Inside" 169)

Indeed, Gordimer's novels demonstrate a maturation process in her engagement with indigenous voices and discourses. Her three post-apartheid-era fictions also add another dimension to this growth and representation; for example, in *The House Gun* (1999), Gordimer brilliantly adopts the narrative style encountered earlier in *July's People.* Therefore, one can question Stephane Serge Ibinga's contention that in her post-apartheid-era fiction,Gordimer now "focuses on the Marxist dialectics of class division with very little comment on politicised racial dialectics," with her "work epitomis[ing] the transition from racial dialectics to the dichotomy of class" (n.p.). Ibinga's reading of Gordimer's post-apartheid-era fiction is somewhat problematical because it appears to overlook the prospect of Gordimer's novels operating as part of a continuum. However, these post-apartheid novels lie outside the scope of this essay.

My interest in the representation of language and discourse in Gordimer's novels has been influenced by Brink's adaptation of Bakhtin's idea regarding the "concept of language as a system, as a phenomenon, as a practice, as a process, in every novel" ("The Language of the Novel" 9). Bakhtin's conception of the dialogic nature of language as *heteroglossia*, "the multi-tongued consciousness," underscores "the actual plurality of language forms activated in any novel" (11-2). This idea helps us to situate different discourses that Gordimer seeks to embody and what they reveal about the social and cultural relations under apartheid. Another justification stems from the pernicious nature of apartheid which permeates the nation's social fabric. As Gordimer notes,

> All writers everywhere . . . are shaped by their own particular society reflecting a particular political situation. Yet there is no country in the Western world where the daily enactment of the law reflects politics as intimately and blatantly as in South Africa. There is no country in the Western world where the creative imagination, whatever it seizes upon, finds the focus of even the most private event set in the overall social determination of racial laws. ("English-Language Literature and Politics" 132)

The representation of discourse in apartheid South Africa mirrors the social strata the divisive apartheid policies engendered. Indeed,

Gordimer's apartheid discourse cannot be extricated from South Africa's socio-political context. Susan Pearsall is of the same view when she observes that Gordimer's novels "render accounts of the intrusions of the political into the everyday" (95). The manifestations of this intrusion are apparent in the inter-racial and cross-cultural intercourse and discourses of *The Lying days*, *The Conservationist*, and *July's People*, as well as other novels in Gordimer's apartheid-era oeuvre. Gordimer uses the problematical and often limited cross-cultural exchange to both expose the debilitating effects of divisive policies and politics and force the reader to interrogate those same issues in order to seek a schema for interpreting the novel. In her apartheid-era fiction, Gordimer generally presents characters from across the racial divide facing difficulties in having meaningful cross-cultural exchange despite being well-intentioned. Her narration then creates contexts in which the reader can consider the mitigating circumstances. This is true of Helen, the protagonist in *The Lying Days*, and Mary Seswayo, a black character she befriends; Mehring, the protagonist in *The Conservationist*, and Jacobus the man in charge of his farm; and Maureen, a protagonist, and her apparent nemesis July, in *July's People*.

In transcribing trans-cultural discourse, Gordimer acts as a "translator" whose primary duty Susan Bassnett sees as seeking to create a text in the target language that can be appreciated by readers while at the same time demonstrating a respect for the source. In this connection, I find Tina Steiner's explanation of "translation" as an "interlingual transfer" that "involves all kinds of stages in the process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries" (302) rather useful. Steiner also dismisses the distinction often accorded to linguistic and cultural translation as a "false one" since "the mediation of language(s) entails the mediation of culture(s) and worldview(s)" (303). As a matter of fact, Gordimer in her novels appears to benefit from what Steiner calls "the paradoxical nature of translation as intercultural transfer, which first "involves appropriation, stereotyping and the negation of difference and otherness" and then provides opportunities for "contact and dialogue" (305), particularly on the part of readers in their negotiation of meaning with the text. Also, the colonial legacy and the confluence of cultures it engendered made cultural translation an integral part of cross-cultural interaction, albeit in a lopsided manner that favours the centre. In the context of the novels under discussion, cultural communication under divisive colonial subjectivities tends to limit meaningful cross-cultural exchange. It is against this backdrop that I discuss Gordimer's apartheid-era fictions.

I: They "Spoke and Shouted in a Language [She] Didn't Understand"

The Lying Days is, in many aspects, naive in incorporating African discourses and less hard-hitting in its reproach of the apartheid system than Gordimer's subsequent apartheid-era novels. This novel, however, also suggests how Gordimer's later fiction would embody African indigenous voices, discourses and cultures. As Alan Lomberg notes:

> In her first novel, *The Lying Days*, Nadine Gordimer established a pattern which all the other novels were to follow. . . it signifies a process inherent in her overall vision of life, and is reinforced by her style, which embraces two large principles . . . particularising and generalising. . . . a capacity for microscopic observations of human behaviour [and] the capacity for discerning general features and principles objectively, and from a distance. (2)

And yet, early critics largely ignored *The Lying Days* as a South African novel because they believed it had "far too little of South Africa and far too much of the coming-of-age of an adolescent," as Nathan Rothman observed in the 3 October 1953 issue of the *Saturday Review* (qtd. in Heywood 19). Whereas the novel can "often barely [be] distanced from the autobiographical" and one in which Gordimer "is almost literally finding her own voice" (Clingman, "History from the Inside", 169), its scope is greater than critics have acknowledged. Also, Gordimer was writing with little precedent to fall back on, if one leaves aside the settler tradition set by Olive Schreiner's 1883 *The Story of an African Farm*. Indeed, as John Cooke observes: "At the start of her career [Gordimer] was most concerned with the limitations inherent in the position of the colonial writer, the most obvious of which was the minimal body of literature on which she could build" (534).

What has often been overlooked by many critics about this work, however, is, first, how it deliberately seeks to distance itself from traditional English literature from which it emerged and, second, how it employs indirect discourse to represent what the narrator lacks access to, but which the reader can infer from the text. To begin with, *The Lying Days* questions rather than affiliates itself with the mainstream European literary tradition. This deliberate attempt to align with Africa, rather than Europe, is an important step for Helen, the novel's protagonist and narrator, and Gordimer as well. Helen can only effectively engage with her native South Africa after "emerg[ing] from the trappings of colour-consciousness that were as 'natural'" to the white South Africans "as the walls of home and school" (Gordimer, *Interpreters* 110). Gordimer, on the other hand, appears to see her fiction, even at this early stage, as rooted in Africa, not in Europe. On the whole, the questioning of the relevance of the "gentle novels of English family life" and "stray examples of the proletarian novel . . . about the life of the poor in England" (31-2)[1] to a child in South Africa constitutes the first step in Helen's unlearning process, which also has implications for the placement of the novel itself in postcolonial discourse.

Generally, the reading of South Africa's apartheid-era fiction through the prism of postcolonial theory tends to present problems because of the

"colonial structure" in place despite the country having gained independence in 1910. In this regard, Nicholas Visser's "Postcoloniality of a Special Type" explores the intricacies of South Africa's appropriation of postcolonial theory, by examining both "the centralist" and "moderate" versions, whose acceptance of "We were colonial [and now] we have become postcolonial; no further fundamental transformations are required" appears to coincide with the 1994 inclusive and democratic elections (as the "now") is problematical. These versions base their analyses "on colonialism" and treat "race" as "the primary factor in South African affairs" (Visser 92, 93). Although Visser concludes that South Africa's appropriation of postcolonial theory "is unlikely to be accomplished by any theoretical orientation of prefixed by *post-*, whether hard or soft, strong or weak, excessive or moderate" (94), postcolonial theory is useful in interpreting Gordimer's apartheid-era fiction on two grounds. First, Gordimer attempts to reorient, for instance, *The Lying Days* beyond the trappings of Eurocentricism (the colonial) towards "our Africa" (the postcolonial). Second, the convoluted nature of cultural exchange in South Africa—whether colonial or postcolonial—can also be informed by a "tendency to essentialize race," which "underlines much postcolonial thought" (Visser 86), even though Gordimer attempts to subvert such racialised dichotomies by interrogating their root-causes and effects. On the whole, the application of postcolonial discourse in this essay has been based on Simon During's definition of "postcolonialism" as "the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images." Both white and black characters in Gordimer's apartheid-era fiction have been cast as "victims of imperialism" due to divisive policies, hence the resultant convoluted cross-cultural exchange.

Helen also faces a challenge of developing an Afro-centred consciousness different from that of her mother, who is trapped in a colonial mentality. This is where indirect discourse comes in. When her mother insists that these "gentle novels of English family life" are the materials "a girl should grow up not knowing what life is like" (32), Helen is bemused. "[B]rought up into the life of a South African mine," she finds these stories of children enjoying upper-middle-class English family domesticity "weird and exotic" as well as alienating primarily because she cannot "read a book" in which she herself "was recognisable" in which there is a "girl" like Anna, the African servant, "who did the housework and the cooking and called the mother and father Missus and Baas." The "real world" for Helen lies outside the insularity of her white homestead in "this unfamiliar part" of her town, which constitutes her "own world" that "did not exist in books." Then the intrusive adult persona explains that "if this was the beginning of disillusion, it was also the beginning of Colonialism," that is, "the identification of the unattainable distant with the beautiful" as well as "the substitution of 'overseas' for 'fairyland'" (11). It is this very association that the novel appears to recant. What Helen does not state directly makes the reader interrogate what she misses.

It is also worth noting that at this stage of her career, Gordimer, as a white South African, found herself writing against colonisation and its effects within white settler codes. Indeed, as a white writer, Gordimer found herself in an awkward position where she had to attack the colonial attitudes with which black Africans would otherwise identify her. Explaining the kind of dilemma Gordimer faces, JanMohamed sees only qualified success in such an endeavour:

> Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of [one's] culture. As Nadine Gordimer's and Isak Dinesen's writings show . . . this entails in practice the virtually impossible task of negating one's very being, precisely because one's culture is what formed that being. Moreover, the colonizer's invariable assumption about his moral superiority means that he will rarely question the validity of either his own or his society's formation and that he will not be inclined to expend any energy in understanding the worthless alterity of the colonized. (65)

Gordimer was aware of this limitation when she noted that "the one thing [a white man] cannot experience is blackness, with all that implies in South Africa" just as it is conversely true for a black man because "[e]ach is largely outside the other's experience-potential," and the "identification of class with colour means that breaching class barriers is breaking the law," thus "limiting the writer's intimate knowledge of his society" ("English-Language and Politics" 148). Gordimer's writing cannot be categorically classified as colonialist in the same sense as the imperial adventure fiction in the mould of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or H. Rider Haggard's *She* or *King Solomon's Mines*. Gordimer progressively makes an attempt to "understand [. . .] the worthless alterity" in the discourse of her novels. In fact, her first novel rejects the romanticised notions about Africa as the home to "the great rivers, the savage tribes, the jungles and the hunt for huge palm-eared elephants." Instead, it presents romanticised Eurocentric notions of Africa as having nothing to do with the reality of "the sixty miles of Witwatersrand veld that was our Africa" (91).

The linguistic representation of *The Lying Days* mirrors South Africa's apartheid policies of exclusion—of "whites-only" enclaves—since the indigenous African languages and discourses operate on the margins of what on the surface appears to be a whites-only discourse. Gordimer would later explain that the "cultural isolation of whites who left their Europe" coupled with the "cultural upheaval of blacks under conquest" has resulted in a "compartmentalization of society" that condemns the white writer to a life in which s/he remains "buried in his segregated cemetery" (131), and "cut off by enforced privilege from the greater part of society in which he lives" (148). This enforced separateness makes Helen only visualise black women's moods from "one's experience of Europeans" since there is "no way of knowing" (186). She has "grown up, all [her] life among strangers," the black Africans, whose language had been in her ears "like the barking of dogs" or "cries of birds" (186),

both frightening images, associated with the adverse effects of social exclusion. In fact, the absence of African languages also reflects Helen's limited cross-cultural interaction.

To transcend such linguistic apathy and indifference, Gordimer attempts in the novel to make up for what Helen—and Gordimer's own early consciousness—lacks through the deployment of indirect discourse, which alerts the reader to what the narrator does not know. In this regard, the novel presents the discourse in African languages by implication, as the narrator lacks access to indigenous languages. Maureen simply watches as "dozens of natives along the path" exchange some words in an indigenous language: "Quite often the exchange lasted for half a mile, bellowed across the veld until one was too far away to do more than wave a stick eloquently at the other" (*Lying Days* 9). She has no way of transcribing their spoken words, let alone their culture to which she remains an outsider, cut off from it socially and linguistically. The reader, on the other hand, can infer some of what is missing and fill in the gaps. Gordimer uses this contrast to expose the effects of apartheid policies on cross-cultural human relations.

Also, Helen can communicate with Mary Seswayo, a black character whom she befriends at University, the house-servant Ann, and other African characters only in English, regardless of their linguistic competence. Helen's communication with blacks largely operates at the level of a master-servant discourse, with severely limited social and cultural interaction. Ironically, Helen has "long lived surrounded by natives who simply attended our lives in one function or another" and as a child saw them "as animals in a zoo" (159). As a child, Helen experiences fear due to her ignorance of indigenous South African languages. She may find "Native boys […] harmless and familiar" because they were "servants" or "delivery boys," "Mine boys," or "gardenboys," but she also fears them because they are "mysterious" and "spoke and shouted in a language [she] didn't understand" (4). Helen suffers from both linguistic and cultural alienation. The apartheid system condemns her to the status of an outsider despite being surrounded by indigenous African languages and cultures.

On the whole, this European *bildungsroman* imperative hints at Gordimer's nascent awareness of the critical need to incorporate indigenous African voices. In this novel, important black voices that might otherwise enrich the narratives anchored in an African setting remain underrepresented, a limitation Gordimer addresses in her subsequent fiction. As Head concludes: "[T]he indeterminacy and ambiguity" about the stage Helen reaches at the end of the story "affects the formal effects and devices of the novel," an indication that "Gordimer is already making headway in her pursuit of appropriate forms to encompass her message of requisite cultural and political change" (36). What emerges in *The Lying Days* is that Gordimer's novels cannot satisfactorily reflect "our Africa" without taking into account the languages and beliefs of the indigenous African voices.

II: "In the Safety of Their Own Language"

Compared to *The Lying Days* and some of Gordimer's earlier novels such as *Occasion for Loving* (1963), her sixth novel, *The Conservationist*, is more forthcoming not only in attacking the apartheid system but also in incorporating African speech, whether in indigenous African languages or in translation.

The manifestations of African languages, or discourses, within the novel, and cultures also assume a higher profile in this novel than they do in *The Lying Days* and other earlier novels, albeit in a convoluted sense. This problematic linguistic relationship is best captured by the signposting to the farm owned by Mehring, the protagonist— "NO THOROUGHFARE/ GEEN TOEGANG/ AKUNANDLELA LAPHA" (*Conservationist* 140).[2] The signposting deploys two languages of power in apartheid South Africa—English and Afrikaans—and one indigenous African language. The two languages of power take precedence over the indigenous African language. And yet, this "absurd" but also "hopeful claim that can never be recognized" (141) is primarily designed to discourage black South Africans—speakers of indigenous African languages, and the majority of those who will read the sign—from trespassing onto the property.

The discourses in *The Conservationist* are much more inclusive as well; the novel takes on board the perspectives of black African characters by exploring their thoughts and experiences. In fact, *The Conservationist* has two parallel thought-processes covering two distinct worlds in the story: that of the indigenous Africans (whose perspective is embodied in the epigraphs relating to the amatongo in Zulu), and the white settlers (whose point of view is captured by Richard Shelton's poem "The Tattooed Desert," which is also used as an epigraph). Jacobus and other black characters represent the former, and Mehring and other whites the latter. The parallel presentation of these thought processes helps to undercut Mehring's seemingly dominant perspective. It also provides the reader with access to both sides of the conflict to grasp the novel's treatise on the effect of divisive apartheid policies.

The grafting of the *amatongo*, or this "ancestor motif," into the narrative structure is "central to the complex ironies" presented in *The Conservationist* (Thorpe 184). In all, the novel draws ten quotations from Rev. Henry Callaway's nineteenth century book *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, and these provide some insights into the Zulu traditional belief system. This alignment with the African tradition is also significant because, as Gitte Postel asserts, the "Historical, Biblical, and Zulu myths are all part of the discourse of this focalization" that "frames both Mehring's observations and the reader's interpretations" (49). Furthermore, the placing of the *amatongo* at the centre of the narrative acknowledges the centrality—rather than the marginality—of black

presence on the land that Mehring prefers to ignore. This presentation of parallel linguistic and cultural systems is designed to expose and interrogate the effects of the apartheid system upon the lives of different social groups. This use of two parallel thought processes also creates room for presenting two cultural traditions—white and black—in opposition to each other.

Also, the intercalations—or the insertion—of indigenous African language words in English discourse acknowledge directly the presence of other linguistic landscapes and cultural systems subordinated to the main narrative discourse. These indigenous language words are linked to the AmaZulu spirituality at the heart of the narrative. Phineas' wife, the most spiritual character in the novel, speaks of "snakes she had dreamt she was going to turn into," the "*Umthlwazi, Ubulube, Inwakwa, Umzingadhlu*; of *imamba* and *inyandezulu*, the snakes that are men and if killed will come to life again," and also of "the ugly and rough-skinned lizard, the *isalukazana* (the lizard that is a little old woman) that is the "*itongo* [spirit] of an old woman" (*Conservationist*165-6). As a traditional seer, Phineas's wife connects various occurrences in the novel to highlight the fact that black characters see Mehring's farm as haunted because of the presence of the unnamed man who is buried on the farm. Eileen Julien uses the term "ornamentalism" to describe the tendency by African writers to authenticate their writing through the short-hand of indigenous words, the incorporation of oral practices or references to ritual. However, in this case, Gordimer's conscious use of these elements appears geared towards alerting the reader to the parallel worlds that dominate the discourse of the novel. In this novel, for example, the reader cannot digest what Mehring says without recourse to the views of the black characters. This process also tends to undermine Mehring's seemingly dominant perspective.

As a matter of fact, Mehring, who considers himself the *master* of the farm, opts to remain an outsider, linguistically and socially, in his relationship with black characters and their languages and cultures, despite claiming ownership of the 400-acre farm forty minutes' drive from town on which the blacks live mainly as squatters. Indubitably, Mehring turns himself into a pariah, and black characters talk about him "in the safety of their own language" to which they retreat and "can say what they like" (75). As in the case of Helen, the black characters can communicate with him in English, the language of power, but he cannot do the same with them in their indigenous languages. Furthermore, the level of intimacy the black characters enjoy in the indigenous African languages further estranges Mehring from the land and the people to which and to whom he is only partially committed. Jacobus and other black characters on the farm "greet [. . .] each other with 'brother', 'sister', 'mother', 'uncle', a grammar of intimacy that went with *their language*" (35; added emphasis). The narrator remains conscious of the linguistic gap and uses it to expose the cosmetic nature of the ties Mehring has with the land and its people. The isolation of Mehring when contrasted with the camaraderie of black characters exposes his lack of interaction with those on his farm.

In the novel's troubled cross-cultural exchange, English is also presented as an imposed language for the black characters, who are more at home speaking their indigenous languages than English. In English, Jacobus' "words were different" and he "also stuttered," but in his native tongue, "the language they all spoke" (64) he "talk[ed] again, fast loud" and "and they all listened" (65). In both *The Conservationist* and *July's People* (discussed a little later), Gordimer avoids creating what Ngũgĩ calls "this English-language speaking peasantry and working class, existing only in novels" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 22). The novel distinguishes the speech black characters utter directly in English and the speech they produce in indigenous language but which is presented in the narrative supposedly in translation, as the following two passages illustrate—the first is between Jacobus and another black farm-hand, and the second between Mehring and Jacobus.

First Passage:

—Like the India's dogs at the shop. Something everybody will be afraid of. I'll keep it chained up all day, then it will get mad at night. That's the way to have a good dog. —

—Ask him. —

—I told you — many times. I have said it to him. —

—What can you do then.—

—Many times. You know how it is. You say one thing, and they just use it to say another. He looks past my face: how many dogs already on this farm? . . . (32)

Second Passage:

—Jacobus, I was coming to find you. How's everything?—

—No—Everything it's all right. One calf he's borned Friday. But I try to phone you, yesterday night—

—Good, that's from the red cow, eh? —

—No, the red cow's she's not ready. This from that young one, that ones you buy last year from Pietersburg— (11)

Jacobus' speech is free and natural in his African language but laboured, constrained and ungrammatical in English. As in the case of July in *July's People*, this English is functional; he learns it primarily to communicate with Mehring and other non-indigenes.

Neither does the South African pidgin, a hybrid language, promote mutual cross-cultural exchange. It, too, has been tainted by the divisive discourses that apartheid fostered. This African *lingua franca* of the mines and farms is "the pidgin white people understand" in *The Conservationist*, or "bastard black *lingua franca*" in *July's People*, largely deployed in a vain attempt to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap amongst racially and linguistically stratified communities. And yet, this language's "vocabulary was limited to orders given by whites and responses made by blacks" (*July's People* 45). Characters use "the few necessary words of their language in the pidgin form that evolved in the mines" such as "*Mina funa lo job"* [I am looking for a job] *and "Yinifuna"* [what are you looking for] as well as "pidgin Afrikaans and English used by blacks on the farms" (*The Conservationist* 119) to facilitate communication. The social stigma

attached to this low hybrid language prompts Maureen, a primary character in *July's People*, to be "ashamed. . . of a father who had talked to his 'boys' in a dialect educated blacks who'd never been down a shaft in their lives regarded as an insult to their culture" (45).

This skewed apartheid intercultural exchange is also reinforced by the failure of those with white privileges to learn indigenous African languages. In itself, such language acquisition may not necessarily foster inter-cultural communication. First, Helen in the *Lying Days*, then Mehring in *The Conservationist* and the Smales in *July's People* fail to acquire indigenous languages and also fail to foster meaningful cross-cultural communication and their knowledge gap is exposed. Partly, the elevation of the languages of power to a status where the indigenous African must learn them to communicate with their conquerors reduces the motivation for these characters to learn indigenous African languages as well. In particular, Mehring's inability to learn an indigenous African language is particularly notable considering the fact that he is a polyglot. Eleni Coundouriotis observes that Mehring's "white privilege lends him the air of a more conventional cosmopolitanism" as "he travels, speaks many languages" (5). And yet, none of these languages is an indigenous African language. The apartheid social setup made the acquisition of the language of power mandatory for the blacks since they needed these languages to communicate with whites across the colour-bar; conversely, there was no such pressing demand for whites, hence Mehring's life in his comfort zone, learning only the languages he believes matter.

The failure to cultivate a meaningful relationship with the blacks makes Mehring suffer from colonial delusion as he "think[s] in time there's something between [him] and the 'simple' blacks [he doesn't] have to talk to" (*Conservationist* 177-8). Mehring also misreads their complexity because of his limited understanding of their world and culture. The "languages and cultural difficulties" (180) he faces stem from his deliberate policy of keeping a distance from the so-called "'simple' blacks." As a result, Mehring can only "imagine someone speaking as the [blacks] speak" (180). His failure to identify with the people on his farm, their languages, and their culture is a matter of choice for him. Postel underscores the "mythical inter-textuality" (54) in Gordimer's *The Conservationist*. But one can go a step further: the "mythical spaces" that "define boundaries between different parts of Mehring's farm, or between farm and city" or "insiders and outsiders" that Postel refers to also implicitly account for Mehring's witting or unwitting refusal to interact effectively with the legitimate owners of the space he wants to appropriate.

Mehring represents what Thorpe calls "the bankrupt white order whose possession rests upon an amoral assertion of power" (190). And yet, he cannot control the farm without recourse to the services of the Jacobuses he disregards. Thus, Mehring walks alone in the vlei (the expansive land he acquires because of his white privilege) but distances himself from the blacks on what he sees as "his" land. This failure is

evident in his disjointed and poor discourse with the black people. Although he does an honourable thing by sanctioning the reburial of the unnamed dead man, he opts not to attend the ceremony. This refusal confirms his alienation from the land he claims to own and those who people it, along with their language and culture. As a social recluse, Mehring has no way of knowing how to live with the "squatters" on the land, who are here to stay.

III: "Speaking an African Language was Simply a Qualification"

July's People, which attempts to bring together whites and blacks under reversed roles on the verge of a revolution to usher in majority black rule, demonstrates the perniciousness of the cultural divide created by centuries of divisive policies. The well-intentioned liberal white protagonists fail to interact effectively with their African hosts despite being more committed to the land than the naive Helen in *The Lying Days*, and the self-serving Mehring, a sojourner on the "farm." The Smales, a family of white liberals, in *July's People*, on the other hand, fully commit to the African land and, presumably, to the people as well. However, they turn out to be victims of powerful forces they are unable to control. Erritoumi observes that *July's People* "expose[s] the impasse to which apartheid condemned interracial relations" and "equally envisions a utopian future in which South Africans try to overcome their intractable social and economic problems" (74). The novel represents this "impasse" at the level of intercultural discourse, illustrating the linguistic limits and problematic politics of identification. Indeed, the Smales are let down by the rather limited linguistic and cultural interaction they have with their indigenous hosts. As Brink aptly notes, "Gordimer exposes this group of floundering Crusoes in their efforts to adapt to 'us and them . . . an explosion of roles,' which involves an explosion of language" ("Writing Against Big Brother" 193). The difficulties the characters encounter in the "village" of their once loyal servant, July, as the tables turn are most clearly reflected in their failure to communicate effectively. In the *Grammar of Identity*, Clingman notes that the 'village' setting in *July's People* (and the desert in Gordimer's post-apartheid-era novel, *The Pickup*) are central to grasping the relationship between both the existential and literal settings of the novel and the novel's rhetorical agenda on the contestable identity represented through language.

This difficulty is also activated by the ambiguity in the novel's title *July's People*, which readers have to grapple with. It raises a question: who are "July's people"? The term applies to both the village people (to whom July is naturally affiliated, linguistically, culturally, and ethnically) and the white people he has brought to the village, and with whom he has spent fifteen years of acculturation that has helped to map his dual identity. But July is also Mwawate in his native African language: "July,"

as the chief explains, "was a name for whites to use" and for "fifteen years they had not been told what the chief's subject really was called" (*July's People* 120). In other words, the Smales have not been aware of July's true identity in those fifteen years. Also, this indigenous name shows that July retains his language and ethnic identity despite years of acculturation under apartheid. The indigenous African name Mwawate identifies July with the village of his birth, which gives him an Afro-centred identity. His Euro-centred acculturation thus remains partial, even as it conditions him to a life of subservience, linguistically and socially.

The reversal of roles in the 'village' devoid of the modern luxuries critiques white settler ideology in South Africa. As Paul Rich observes:

> White settler political ideology in South Africa has traditionally seen itself as the embodiment of some form of 'civilization' against the threatened 'barbarism' of African majority rule. The term has a significance both in its Victorian imperial roots and in its facility for acting as a kind of common ideological denominator binding the political discourse of both Afrikaner and English settlers into a common defense of 'white civilization.' (365)

July's People places the liberal white characters in the African 'village', or a country under black Africans, the supposed centre of this 'barbarism', to test how they will hold on to their values. This village setting is the bedrock of African cultural identity, where the languages of the Smales—English and Afrikaans, represented by Maureen and her husband Bam respectively—prove inadequate. In linguistic and cultural terms, the African village is the cornerstone of indigenous African languages and cultures, where the languages of power spoken by the Smales have little value.

Language lies both at the heart of the struggle and the envisaged redemption that the novel suggests may lie within the strictures of apartheid divisive politics. The fictional world of the novel thrives in polyglot space; however, there is limited meaningful cross-cultural interaction between the races due to linguistic and, hence, cultural barriers. The failure of communication between the characters from the two racial groups points to a wider social communication problem: none of the women that Bam encounters can "speak his languages" (39)[3], English and Afrikaans, and neither can he speak their indigenous languages. In a group of drinkers, Bam makes himself understood only because one "could speak a few words not of English but of Afrikaans" and another "some English" (39). Also, Maureen tells her son Victor that they "don't understand our language" (14). The Smales know only the languages of power, but these have little value in a society where the majority speak indigenous languages.

Paradoxically, the whites "who speak their languages are never people" like Bam and Maureen, but "always the ones who have no doubt that whites are superior" (44). These are "Whites in the pass offices and labour bureaux who used to have to deal with blacks all the time across the counter" to whom "speaking an African language was simply a

qualification" (44). Learning indigenous languages boosts their credentials to work in offices that further entrench white domination. Thus, the political commitments of the liberal Smales, who do nothing to learn the languages of the people they purport to side with, comes under scrutiny. Even for outside communication they rely on the radio in this rural outpost whose "voice spoke English only to the white pair, only for them," not the "other radios in the community, bellowing, chattering, twanging pop music, the sprightly patter of commercials in a black language" (25). They simply cannot extricate themselves from the cultural barricades erected by apartheid.

The novel is also quick to remind the readers of the problematic nature of the marriage of convenience between Maureen Hetherington and Bamford Smales. Their union symbolically links two acrimonious groups who also happen to be the two dominant white linguistic groups in South Africa: those of British and Dutch (Afrikaner) extraction. The Afrikaans and Anglo-Saxon historical connection to apartheid is also reflected in their gender roles—Bam a male, and Maureen, a female, the former more rooted in the soil than the latter. From a linguistic point of view, Maureen, an Anglophone and conveyor of the dominant language of power in Africa (thanks to the British conquest of the Afrikaans), is the central consciousness through which the events in the novel are told. The cracks of this marital relationship emerge as the narration progresses.

The presentation of the Smales (an apparent pun for Smells, whose use is tinged with irony in the novel), also presented as "white pariah dogs in a black continent" (8), allows the novel to revisit the primary theme of Gordimer's 1958 essay "Where do Whites Belong?" in Africa. As Africans, these whites are "not Americans, or Europeans of other European nations" (126). That the Smales refuse to flee abroad when an opportunity arises makes it clear that they see Africa as their home. Michael Chege in "African of European Descent" presents two possible reasons for this: they are either "white foreigners who play the expatriate game" released "from any feelings of sympathy or any real obligations toward the people [they] are among'" and see Africa as "less a place or a people than a standard of living—a better way of life than most of them would enjoy back home"; or whites who "recognize the necessity of facing Africa, and to seriously imagine themselves" (and here Chege borrows a phrase from Nelson Mandela) as "proud sons and daughters of Africa" (73). Although the latter scenario applies to the liberal Smales, the novel undermines this dichotomy. The inability of the Smales and their black hosts to understand each other is as much a product of limited linguistic and cultural exchange as it is a product of many years of divisive colonial and apartheid policies. It also exposes how cosmetic has been the cultural exchange between the liberal Smales and their servant July (alias Mwawate) under apartheid policies.

Not knowing indigenous languages creates wide gaps in the Smales' knowledge and understanding of July's "village" world. For the *gumba-gumba*, the traditional gathering, the Smales children, Victor, Gina, and

Royce, "kn[o]w the name in the village people's language but not in their own" (140). On the one hand, this indigenous African language complements their knowledge of "our Africa." On the other hand, the "gumba-gumba" exposes the limitations of linguistic and cultural knowledge of the Smales. This becomes even more apparent when July asks a man on the roof,

> in the way his people did, teasing and encouraging, the first part of what he said gabbled and rapid, the syllables of the last word strongly divided and drawn out, the word itself repeated. *Mi tat wa tu ku nadziha ngopfu, swi famba a moyeni. Ncino wa maguva lawa, hei—i…hei—i!* [. . .] The *gumba-gumba* was itself the occasion. (141)

Gordimer's narrator leaves the Zulu expressions untranslated, attesting to how the Smales operate outside the social linguistic and cultural circle of the indigenes in whose nest they have come to roost. Inevitably, as Steiner aptly points out, "instances where the narrative withdraws its translation nevertheless invite translation" (303) on the part of the reader.

Apart from not knowing the indigenous languages, the Smales also shun this meaningful social event. The *gumba-gumba* presents them with a cultural learning opportunity, yet when the event starts the "white people wander [. . .] away": the father "did not want to drink that stuff and did not want to offend" (141) and "the mother thought there were pleasanter sights for the children than—in particular—some of the women [. . .who] get [. . .] drunk with their babies on their backs, and [. . .] pee only as far as their staggering would carry them" (142). This attitude amounts to self-imposed exile. Retrospectively, Gordimer notes that "[i]n spite of all the vile and terrible things that have been and continue to be done in the name of all whites here," South Africa "has been the single African country where whites once had the chance to enter into a changing—and that is to say mutual—indigenous culture" ("From Apartheid" 45).

The Smales wittingly pass up this opportunity for white and black characters to come together, and this reveals more about the Smales' attitude to things African than their failure to acquire an indigenous African language. As a result, the Smales reduce themselves to outsiders looking in. Not surprisingly, Maureen refers to "his [July's] people." One encounters the same usage at the beginning of the novel: "July bent at the door way and began that day for them as *his* kind has always done for *their* kind" (*July's People* 1; added emphasis).

Due to the turbulent colonial experience of conquest, black characters also treat whites as essentially different, as the superior other. July's mother, for example, compliments Bam for the game-meat he has provided by calling him "*mhani*" (81)—a white man—just as she uses "mhwanyan" (or "my lady"), an expression "that had come down to her attached to any white female face, from the conquests of the past" (132). These terms perpetuate the idea of otherness that attended the colonial encounter, and are also sustained in a number of indigenous languages. As Bam reminds his black hosts, they also use "*umlungu," "*white baas" (the latter word in Afrikaans), "*nkosi" "morema,"* and "*hosi"* (117) to refer to

the almost cult-like status that white people had come to assume in their African settlement. Bam's intervention here is particularly revealing since he appears to suggest that the cultivation of otherness cuts both ways, also implying that undoing this damage is also a shared responsibility. The novel thus suggests that black characters are, to a certain extent, also culpable in the lopsided cross-cultural exchange.

Both Maureen and July, for example, are at an impasse because of the adverse colonial and apartheid conditioning. In his 1966 essay entitled "The Black Writer's Burden," Chinua Achebe describes the enduring effects of the colonial encounter thusly: "In terms of human dignity and human relations, the encounter was almost a complete disaster for the black races. It has warped the mental attitudes of both blacks and whites" (135). *July's People* exposes these "mental attitudes of both blacks and whites" through their problematic social intercourse. As a result, Maureen fails to understand July and his state, whether in the town under her wings or in the village where he gives her sanctuary. When Maureen "didn't understand [July] it was her practice to give some noncommittal sign or sound, counting on avoiding the wrong response by waiting to read back his meaning from the context of what he said next" (97). This reaction defines the nature of their communication back in town. Bam is even worse off because he "often [got] irritated [. . .] by a quick answer that made it clear, out of sheer misunderstanding, the black man's English was too poor to speak his mind." July "might mean 'place' in the sense of role, or might be implying she must remember she had no claim to the earth—'place' as territory" (97). July and Maureen can "assume comprehension" between them only if the latter keeps "away from even the most commonplaces of abstractions" because his "was the English learned in kitchens, factories and mines" (95-6). In this bumpy relationship, three issues emerge.

First, July has acquired an English limited to his socioeconomic dealings with white South Africans. The apartheid system teaches July to communicate what is necessary for him to perform tasks for his "masters." Maureen knows that July is "not a simple man." After all, "they could not read him . . . back there, for fifteen years; but at the time, they had put it down to the inevitable, distorting nature of dependency" (60). Failure to "read" July stems from the limited nature of the apartheid English at his disposal, and hence the limited meaningful cross-cultural interaction he has with the Smales. The identification of English with subservience is also evident when the village chief feigns lack of competence in the language. Initially, he pretends to "kn[o]w no white man's language" because it "was not for him to work as a servant or go down the mines" (115). He identifies English with the servitude associated with white domination. However, when he realises that the balance of power has shifted in favour of black South Africans (the Smales are on the run and basically at his mercy), the chief decides to address the Smales directly in English without July's suspect translation. "They want to kill you," he suddenly says in English, "without any explanation" and "with a face that

stopped short of any surprise"(117) before speaking "again [. . .] in his own language" (118).

Secondly, July is also trapped in the language of subservience, even as he attempts to assert his newly-found power. Hence his statement: "Your boy who work for you" whom "you trusted there in town for fifteen years" (69). This "absurd 'boy' [falls] upon [Maureen] neither in strokes, neither appropriate nor to be dodged" (69-70). It was a word that Maureen's father "had used" as part of the vocabulary in apartheid South Africa but "was never used in *her* house." As a white liberal, Maureen, "priggishly shamed and exposed others who spoke it in her presence" and had "challenged it in the mouths of white shopkeepers and even policemen." However, the novel exposes her commitment as surface-deep since inside of her, she still accepts the idea of July as he is defined by the apartheid policies, not as a person, with his own culture and humanity. It is not until July warns her that he is "not thinking all the time for your things, your dog, your cat" (71) that Maureen realises that he chooses "what he wanted to know and not know," and as the "present was his; he would arrange the past to suit it" (96). Back in his village, July asserts his wants more freely than under apartheid in town. Indeed, apartheid conditions have trained July to be non-committal, so his statement remains largely "unqualified, [as he] did for every kind of commitment: to a burial society, a hire purchase agreement, their thumbprints put to a labour contract for the mines or plantations" (152). Thus, the July Maureen believes she knows is actually a lie, not the Mwawate she now has to contend with.

Third and most important, Maureen accommodates only what comfortably fits her liberal beliefs, ignoring the notion that July is more than the servant she had assumed him to be. In fact, the more July asserts his power before Maureen, the more untenable it becomes to sustain their rapport in English. Their conflict stems from a misunderstanding based on the word "dignity." Once Maureen "drop[s] fifteen years of the habit of translation into very simple, concrete vocabulary" in English, she wonders whether "he understood the word" and had avoided using "the word 'dignity' to him" before "not because she didn't think he understood the concept" or "didn't have any," but because she feared "the term itself [. . .] might be beyond his grasp of the [English] language" (72). Before "she came here," she had not realised that "the special consideration she had shown for his dignity as a man, when he was by definition a servant, would become his humiliation itself, the one thing there was to say between them that had any meaning" (98). When their roles are reversed, Maureen finally comprehends the nature of July's humiliation even as he opts to speak eloquently in the native language she cannot understand:

> Suddenly he began to talk at her in his own language, his face flickering powerfully [. . .] She understood although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, *in order for him to be her idea of him*. But for himself—to be intelligent, honest, dignified for *her* was nothing; his measure as a man was taken elsewhere and by others. She was not his mother, his

> wife, his sister, his friend, his people. *He spoke in English what belonged in English.* (152; emphasis added)

Their social interaction had hitherto been steeped in falsities, with Maureen complicit, as she safeguarded the privileges that came with her white status. In this regard, Erritoumi sees "Maureen's liberal views and her humane treatment of her servant before the revolutionary war" as "cosmetic" because they "leave intact the economic discrimination of apartheid" (74). However, Maureen's problems go deeper than that. Gordimer retrospectively explains her situation as follows:

> I see Maureen as, in a way, the last colonial woman. She has been handed from father to husband. And she has had, in effect, two husbands—though she didn't realize it—because July does so much for her. July is so protective of her, takes care of her, takes all sorts of burdens off her. This is . . . a typically colonial attitude—that the white woman has a man who looks after her. In the classic colonial situation she wouldn't even have worked. She just would have been the graceful consort of the husband. And then there would be soft-footed servitors running around-male. So, in effect, you have two husbands there. And then, of course, both husbands turn out not to be able to protect her anymore . . . her own husband, Bam, without his car and his gun and his office, is absolutely unable to do anything for her . . . . And July turns out to belong to his own people. (Interview with Bazin, 581)

The changed circumstances in the "village" make Maureen fail not only to relate effectively with July and Bam. They also render meaningful dialogue, particularly with July, almost impossible.

This wide gulf between the two social groups, however, does not mask the fact that their fates remain inextricably linked. Hence, Bam questions the categorisations of "Us and them. Who is us, now, and who them?" There is "an explosion of roles" in which the "Union Buildings"—symbolising Afrikaans-Anglo-Saxon unity—and "master bedrooms" (117) are gutted. The old establishment teeters on the brink of an inevitable collapse, but the fates of these two peoples are nevertheless somehow linked, a message also affirmed by the novel's title. Moreover, in July's dark profile there lies "a contempt and humiliation that came from their blood and his," "a feeling brutally shared, one alone cannot experience it, be punished by it, without the other" (62), even though the "validities" that determined "absolute nature of intimate relationships between human beings" were "decided by 'We,' the whites" (64-5). The onus finally falls on both races working together to bridge the cultural divide that has kept them apart for centuries. Even as Bam warns against possible black-on-black violence due to ethnic tensions, Gordimer focuses on the search for a cultural bridge between two races set apart by both colonial and subsequent apartheid policies. Only then can they deal with the problems they face: failure to communicate, failure to relate, and failure to understand their common humanity.

In essence, "them and us" belong to the same side—victims of colonialism and apartheid policies that hamper effective communication. Gordimer suggests that the Smales have been given another chance to

learn and understand not only the language of Mwawate but also his culture, so that they can be effectively integrated in the society dominated by black culture. Of the Smales, only the "colonial" Maureen remains too rigid to seize this opportunity, and hence runs towards a helicopter, uncertain whether she is running towards death or redemption. This ambiguous ending also underlines her untenable situation in the absence of 'unlearning' the apartheid conditioning to adapt and adjust to the African culture. Gordimer also implies that people like the chief and July will have to accommodate the Smales, whose survival under the changed circumstances and long-enforced cultural ignorance also depends on the receptiveness and flexibility of black culture. After all, the Smales did not create the cultural divide engendered by apartheid. All concerned must live with its consequences—together.

Conclusion

The incorporation of African languages, cultures and discourses in Gordimer's novel helps to expose the extent to which the divide between "them and us" fostered by the colour-bar hinders the emergence of a situation in which whites can "merge[ ]with an indigenous culture" (Gordimer, "From Apartheid to Afrocentrism" 46). On the other hand, the novels I have discussed suggest that it is only through mutually beneficial interactions that the wounds from a shared painful history may be healed—whether that interaction is through the medium of indigenous African languages or carefully edited English. In the case of the latter, the communication has to be geared towards equitable relationships, rather than perpetuating linguistic, cultural, and economic gaps. On the whole, Gordimer's apartheid-era novels demonstrate how problematic cross-cultural communication can become when social entities remain insulated behind the privileges sanctioned by divisive laws and sustained by the language of power. They also demonstrate that cross-cultural interaction is more necessary than the artificial barriers created by the apartheid policies. In her apartheid-era fiction, Gordimer exposes the limited and convoluted cross-cultural exchange between black and white through her representation of African discourses. She thus represents the debilitating effects of the divisive apartheid policies on both blacks and whites. The reader is left with the task of negotiating between what is either directly or indirectly stated in the various discourses of the novel to grasp the seemingly paralysing effects of divisive politics and policies that Gordimer so strongly attacked.

Notes

1. All the references from this novel have been taken from Gordimer's *The Lying Days* ([1953]. London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

2. All quotations from Gordimer's *The Conservationist* are from the 1974 Penguin edition published in New York.

3. All the quotations from Gordimer's *July's People* are taken from the 1981 Penguin edition published in New York.

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