Article

Dismembered by Colonialism: On Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and Its Engagement with the Dynamics of a Black Family Structure under Apartheid South Africa

Siyasanga M. Tyali
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5365-6896
University of South Africa
tyalism@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

Nadine Gordimer's much celebrated novel, *July's People* (1981), largely narrates the story of white and black community relations a decade before South Africa's post-apartheid moment (1994). Whilst overtly focusing on various themes of racial relations, one of the passing, yet key thematic, concerns of the novel revolves around settler colonialism, including its apartheid chapter and how it dismembered black family structures in South Africa. Thus, the focus of this article is on *July's People* and its capacity to register and pinpoint some of the continuities and discontinuities that have rendered black biological fathers absent from their families, especially from their young and growing children. The article concentrates on the novel's ability to unmask the lasting negative impact of colonialism on the institution of fatherhood among black South Africans who have been subjected to settler colonialism. Whether these fathers were dismembered from their families as a result of employment migration systems or the alienation that developed as a result of their extended absences from home is a question this article addresses by analysing the novel in relation to such forms of family disintegration. Lastly, by juxtaposing the "perfect" family structure of the Smales against that of July's (Mwawate's), the article grapples with the way in which the novel acts as a register of how settler colonialism, including its apartheid moment, dismembered black South African families.

Keywords: Nadine Gordimer; *July's People*; dismemberment; family; black

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Introduction

Trends in black family structures of South Africa illustrate that the legacy of settler colonialism and its associated role of dismembering families have played a dilapidating role in how some black fathers make sense of the institution of family structures and the practical role of involved parenting. Whilst there are several factors that have contributed to the dismemberment of black South African families, some academic literature has directly traced the cause of such dismemberment to the settler-colonial history of the country. To make sense of colonial dismemberment, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009, 7) reasons that "of course, colonialists did not literally cut off the hands of the colonised or physically bury them alive. Rather, they dismembered the colonised from memory, turning their heads upside down and burying all the memories carried." Furthermore, the impact of such dismemberment continues to reverberate in the modern and the post-apartheid era. Ramphele and Richter (2006, 80), for instance, argue that "the disruption of families and of parenting under colonisation and apartheid, by both men and women, has left its mark on children and on their children." Such analyses have also alluded to the continuities of the disruption of such black family structures as a result of the legacy of settler-colonial oppression that has been inculcated in black and "other(ed)" races of the country.

Some research reports on the state of family structures in South Africa indicate that black families have been exposed to a systematic and engineered destruction as a result of the demands of the settler-colonial capitalist system, which has long required black men to abandon their families in service of settler colonialists' privileges and conveniences. This form of family abandonment often required black men to be absent from their families for extended periods of time (Horwitz 2001). Therefore, this article focuses on how the crisis of family disruption and abandonment, as a result of settler colonialism, has led to a continued legacy of dismemberment among black families. Taking into consideration that "desertion is not always physical, it can also be emotional" (Ramphele and Richter 2006, 79), the article examines the subliminal role of the novel in recording the impact of colonialism in the dismemberment that continues to be experienced at the level of black family structures (Bertelsmann 2016).

July's People, one of Nadine Gordimer's most acclaimed novels, is a literary account of the volatile situation in South Africa during the last decade of formal settler colonialism. Largely scripted to give a revolutionary perspective to the political situation of the country, the novel, among its many themes, tackles a long and complex, but explosive, relationship between a white family and its black domestic/garden worker in the wake of a fictional revolutionary war that was taking place in the country.[1] The

1 In this paper, the idea of apartheid and settler-colonial rule is judged to be a complex but continuing moment in the subjugation of black people by settler colonisers. This is also done in support of Fanon's (1961) argument that, in the context of South Africa, apartheid has been nothing but a compartmentalisation of the colonial situation. This factor is aptly emphasised by Ndlovu-Gatsheni

novel is set "during an imagined revolutionary war of the future [which] offers context, in which white power is tottering, if not already fallen" (Smith 1984, 94). It falls within the genre of speculative fiction as it imagines and grapples with the idea of society and race relations in late apartheid South Africa. The novel revolves around a white family and their bid to escape the chaos of an *avant-garde* war with the help of their long-time domestic servant, July (Mwawate).[2] With the colonial normative order and future of the country uncertain, especially for the settler-colonial communities, the Smales family eventually takes up residence in July's (Mwawate's) unnamed, distant Bantustan home, where the dynamics of white and black co-existence are tackled in an African rural village.

Of interest is that whilst scholars have tackled various themes in their analyses of *July's People*, including race relations, power, family, loss and "mourning" (Amadi and Ifeyinwa 2014; Clingman 1981), the role of colonialism in dismembering black families, surprisingly, has not been overtly crystallised by key literary scholarship. Scholarship on Gordimer's *July's People* has, for instance, focused on topics illustrated by the titles of the following articles: "Masters and Servants: Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and the Themes of Her Fiction" (Smith 1984), "Apartheid and the Decline of the Civilization Idea: An Essay on Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*" (Rich 1984), "From *The Lying Days* to *July's People*: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer" (Green 1988), "Translating the Present: Language, Knowledge, and Identity in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*" (Neill 1990), "Apartheid Inequality and Post-Apartheid Utopia in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*" (Erritouni 2006), and "Artist in the Interregnum: Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*" (Folks 1998). This article therefore expands the scholarship on Gordimer's *July's People* by zooming in on the theme of dismemberment and settler colonialism as an important backdrop to understanding the recurring histories of fractured black family structures in South Africa. Overall, the article connects the dots between settler-colonial migrant labour systems in South Africa and the historical rupture of the institution of fatherhood in black families as portrayed by the novel.

Continuities and Discontinuities: A Brief Look at the Legacy of Black Absent Fathers in South Africa

South Africa, as a colonial imaginary, colonial lived reality and a modern sovereign state, was occupied with an intention of subjugating black people through the ideology of settler colonialism. Colonial settlers came to South Africa "with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over

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(2016), who notes that apartheid is a mutation of settler colonialism and colonialism itself is a complex mutation that can also be traced to slavery etc.

2 In this paper, I have resolved to accompany the name July with Mwawate in brackets. This is important as migrant labourers, especially domestic workers, lost their "native"/African names as a result of the colonisers' inability to pronounce these "native" names. Often, the original names of the domestic workers were replaced by European names such as July for instance.

all things in their new domain" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 5). Therefore, this aspect of the settler-colonial project in this country was marked by an on-going and evolving notion of racism that privileged white people in economic, political and social spheres. By virtue of its ideology, settler colonialism in South Africa equally denigrated black people in all imaginable spheres of their lives. The acts of homemaking by settler colonisers in South Africa have also contributed to on-going race-related discourses of the 20th and 21st centuries. Du Bois (1903, 16) argued that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." Most importantly, it can be argued that this problem of the colour line and race relations has led to a scenario where black men have had to sacrifice their entire lives in servitude of white settler-colonial communities on the African continent and across the diaspora of black communities. In South Africa, "[black] households and families were harassed and torn apart by restrictions on people's movements, by migrant labour, by forced resettlement, and by the resulting poverty and disarray in the most painful of ways" (Ramphele and Richter 2006, 78).

Thus, the problems of dismemberment and separation of black family members can also be traced to the white administrative/settler colonialism (external/internal colonial modes and strategies) and its attitude towards the existence and value of black communities within the colonies. It is in this vein that Ramphele and Richter (2006, 80) further argue that colonialism and its apartheid policy in South Africa have caused a continuing pattern of disrupted family structures among black communities. The reality of black ruptured family structures has continued to exist, because colonisation "was a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results, especially after national independence had been achieved" (Said 1989, 207; cf. Fanon 1961). The question in this article is, therefore, how does Gordimer's *July's People* tackle this national and cultural anomaly that has become endemic as a result of the engineering of black societies and culture by the settler-colonial structure for several centuries? Whilst the formal settler-colonial administration in South Africa was arguably negotiated out of existence in 1994, research literature continues to illustrate that its legacy of dismembering black family structures lives on (Stats SA 2017). Statistics reveal that "South Africa has the lowest marriage rate on the continent, the second highest rate of father absence in Africa after Namibia, [and] low rates of paternal maintenance" (Richter, Chikovore, and Makusha 2010, 2). Furthermore, these anomalies of dismembered family structures have been blamed on the modern capitalist settler-colonial system of accumulation and its impact on the oppressed races of the country. "Migrant labour and the resulting residential separation of partners, delayed marriage, and the growing delinking of childbearing from marriage" (Richter, Chikovore, and Makusha 2010, 2) have resulted in a culture of dismembered family structures among the indigenes of the country. Ultimately, in South Africa and the entire Southern African region as a whole, the combination of colonialism (settler and administrative) and colonial spatial planning, as well as the attendant logic of restricted access to urban areas

for certain race groups within Southern Africa, have resulted in acute forms of structural separation of "men from children and families" (2010, 2).

Therefore, whilst the involvement of fathers in the family and children's lives is important to the development of a society's wellbeing (Engle and Breaux 1998), the case of African families seems to have been altered as a result of social engineering and the entrenching of settler-colonial systems. Horwitz (2001, 111) concludes that "the effects of the absence of large numbers of men from their rural homes undermined rural family structures and household economies." This absence of African men from their nuclear and extended families was largely instrumental in the operation of the South African capitalist economy. "Land alienation, rising taxes and a succession of natural disasters saw spiralling numbers of people entrapped in non-discretionary patterns of migration" (Horwitz 2001, 111). For instance, the Nongqawuse-inspired Xhosa cattle killing episode of 1856 to 1857, the rinderpest catastrophe of 1889, and the Glen Grey Act of 1894 (Stapleton 1994) are some of the South African episodes that pushed black people towards the capitalist economy, thus rendering them useful tools to the colonial project that was underpinned by European modernity. Therefore, the conclusion that is discerned from scholarship is that various colonial strategies were used to destroy the family structures which had existed among black people and this contributed to the alienation of black men from their families.

Dismembered Family Structures: The Role of Colonialism in Dismembering Black Family Structures

Wherever it presented itself, colonialism, largely underpinned by the project of Western modernity, has throughout history aimed to dismember the indigenous communities that have been subjected to its grip. The transatlantic slavery system and the general enslavement of people, the portioning and partitioning of African territories through the 1884 Berlin Conference resolutions, and the resultant dividing of clans and families through unnatural borders across the continent all point to the violence of dismembering the African family (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2009) by the colonial system and Western modernity. In reference to the deliberate and catastrophic impact of such dismembering by colonialism and modernity on African family structures, Du Bois (1903, 152) has indicated that "the wretched of my race [African] that line the alleys of the nation sit fatherless and un-mothered." Therefore, whilst contemporary discourses continue to debate the root cause of these fatherless black children, in reference to South Africa, there are clear historical strategies that were employed to achieve this end.

Race-induced poverty, the migrant labour system, restrictions on people's movement, including the pass law system and the village tax system (Horwitz 2001), all achieved the goal of disrupting and ravaging established ancient African family structures and cultures. For instance, Walker (1990, 180) argues that beyond its polished language "'civilising the native' meant forcing the men into labour—not, however, for themselves, nor to unburden African women, but labour for Whites." In other words,

the structure of the settler-colonial capitalist project illustrates the manner in which colonialism was (is) used for the oppression, separation and manipulation of African families for the "higher purpose of serving the interests of the colonising societies" (Walker 1990, 180).

Black men in South Africa's urban centres were historically needed only for the maintenance and servicing of settler conveniences (the maintenance of settlers' homes and settler urban centres, the creation of settler wealth and the building of settler-focused infrastructure). In relation to these colonial urban centres, Fanon (1961, 30) once postulated that "the settler's town is a well-fed town, an easy-going town; its belly is always full of good things. The settler's town is a town of white people, of foreigners." Thus, in settler-colonial logic, it is a place where black people did not/could not belong but were simply accommodated for the purpose of maintaining the splendour and comforts of the colonisers. Ultimately, the very upkeep of the privileges of settler-colonial towns was historically maintained by the labour of the colonised, the majority of whom were black people in South Africa. Overall, this was a general and lived reality among settler colonised African states. According to Memmi (1965, 96), "the colonised enjoys none of the attributes of citizenship, neither his own, which is dependent, contested and smothered, nor that of the coloniser." Thus, the very migrant labour system that historically dismembered black families marked the citizenship of colonised Africans as that which can only be attained in the "native town" and Bantustan areas. This is where he "belonged," in spaces of "native towns," places of "niggers and dirty arabs" (Fanon 1961, 30). Historically, black men, therefore, have been forced into the migrant labour system, because as colonised beings, they belonged in "the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation" (Fanon 1961, 30). In South Africa, all these were called "homelands," and they were created through the sanctioning of various legislations, including the 1913 Land Act, which went on to be instrumental in the creation of Bantustans as "ghettos" for maintaining Africans and as reserves where native labour, uncomplicated by the burden of live-in family dependents, could be sought by settler colonisers.

For the purpose of this article, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* is used as a tool to facilitate an understanding of the impact of South African settler colonialism on black family structures. *July's People* is an important case study for this article as its narrative grapples with the history of South Africa, settler-colonial bourgeois families, black families as well as the history of the black migrant labour system. It is also an imagined and speculative glimpse of what a future South Africa could be/could have been. Smith (1984, 94) concludes that "in its very daring—to create the almost unimaginable crumbling of white mastery—*July's People* could be seen as primarily prophetic and admonitory, its warning incorporated at every stage in the depiction of the alien roles thrust on its white protagonist forced to flee their threatened white city to the protection of their servant's tiny, anonymous village in the bush." It is in the village where the reader of this novel becomes a witness to the impact of settler colonialism on the structure of black families.

On the Novel and Its Engagement with Social Ills

The restructuring and control of the indigenous populations by European settlers in South Africa are what has been described by Tuck and Yang (2012, 4–5) as "internal colonialism [which is] the biopolitical and geographical management of people, land, flora and fauna within the 'domestic' borders of the imperial nation." They further state that "in order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the indigenous people that live there" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 6). In the context of South Africa, the impact of settler colonialism on the African family structure can be seen and described as the very annihilation of the ancient African life. Ramphele and Richter (2006, 73) indicate that in South Africa "families were, in fact still are, affected by migrant labour and forced removals and, in particular, what was happening with men—disempowered, unemployed and uprooted—especially in relation to their families and their children." Therefore, of additional interest in this article is how the plot of the novel registers social critiques of colonial settler-induced ills inflicted on African communities.

Literary scholars have suggested that the novel is often underpinned by important social critiques and commentary. In reference to *July's People*, Amadi and Ifeyinwa (2014, 172) have argued that Gordimer was convinced that the novel and its fictitious plot and characters were the best tools "to transmit social truth, because all other forms [of writing] impose certain censorship or strings that make whole-truth impossible." This point was first advanced by Clingman (1981, 165), who noted that "fiction gives history from the inside." With regard to this argument, Clingman (1981, 166) further noted that "the primary material which a novel offers, [is] not so much an historical world, but a certain consciousness of that world." Thus, the role of fiction, and more specifically that of the novel, has been instrumental in the critique of social ills, including critiques that pertain to economic, cultural and social concerns, as well as speaking to the moral fibre of concerned societies. Furthermore, the strength of the novel in settler colonised South Africa rested in its role of analysing relations between the colonised and the colonisers.

In the case of Gordimer, Nixon (1992, 2) has observed that her "South African experience taught her to be equally sceptical of a sense of creative obligation on the one hand and, on the other, of the view of writers as pure, individual sensibilities flying free of ideology." Thus, in this postulation, we have an understanding of Gordimer as a writer and intellectual who is keenly aware of the trappings of the novel and how the novel should not to be uncritically received as a civic activist tool. Among some scholars, this latter perception is seen to be a weakness of the novel. Whilst this may be a contentious case, Clingman (1981, 169) has argued that

> 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 the South African historical development as a whole.

Whilst aware of the dangers of being pigeonholed as a result of thinking along certain ideological lines, as well as the limitations of having a single understanding of the role of the novel, in Nadine Gordimer, seemingly, we encounter a writer, intellectual and status quo analyst who seems to be committed to the emancipation of the general population of South Africa. Amadi and Ifeyinwa (2014, 171) note that among her many thematic areas, Gordimer's novels have dealt with issues as diverse as "love and politics and the racial problem as they relate to South Africa." More than anything, the themes tackled by Gordimer have not only served to reveal the problems of settler colonised and apartheid South Africa, but the projection of the narrative by the writer has also honoured her moral obligations. For instance, Clingman (1981, 166) concludes that "while Gordimer has throughout her career resisted any pressure to subject her writing to immediate political needs or to put her fiction 'at the service of a cause', her moral objective is instead those judgements whose vindication might, it could be hoped, be the verdict of history."

It is in this context that the focus of this article is on the major theme of colonial dismemberment as played out in a novel that narrates the white and black community relations in the fictionalised last dying years of formalised settler colonialism in South Africa. Therefore, in the sections below, the role of settler colonialism in the dismemberment of the nuclear African family is discussed through a thematic focus.

Thematic Areas of Dismemberment in *July's People*: Colonialism, Absence/Erasure and Fatherhood

In the sections below, the focus is on the evidence, as read from Nadine Gordimer's novel, in relation to its role of registering and unmasking the African family's dismemberment that was caused by settler colonialism in South Africa. The discussions below reveal how the novel 1) acts as a register of the continuities of settler-colonial inscribed roles, 2) illustrates how the total erasure of a black family structure from the plot buttresses the concept of dismemberment and, lastly, 3) plays a role in revealing the underlying reasons for dismemberment of black family structures.

Continuities and Discontinuities of Roles: July's (Mwawate's) and the Smales Family's Approaches

From its opening pages, *July's People* grapples with a power relationship between July (Mwawate) and his employers, the Smales family. From an analytical point of view, this is done to highlight a focal characteristic of society in settler colonised South Africa as well as to grapple with the conundrum of inequality across racial lines in the structure of South African society. In this sense, Gordimer (1981, 1), in the opening lines of the novel, states:

> July bent at the doorway and began that day for them as his kind [colonised servants] has always done for their kind [colonisers].

This observation is made in spite of the new role that July (Mwawate) finds himself in—as a host and benefactor to a stranded family who are refugees from the fictitious revolutionary war situation that is taking place in a fictionalised South Africa. Thus, in his continuing role as a servant of the white family, whilst also their host, the writer seems to underscore the long-established relations among the colonised and the colonisers and how these are to be maintained even at the dawn of political independence from colonial-apartheid rule. The narrative (Gordimer 1981, 1) continues:

> No knock; but July, their servant, their host, bringing two pink glass cups of tea and a small tin of condensed milk, jaggedly-opened, especially for them, with a spoon in it.

Whilst July (Mwawate) therefore maintains the role of being a host and benefactor to the stranded white family, from the opening pages of the novel, the old colonial relations between the black man, or more aptly the "native," and the settler live on. This ambiguous role of July (Mwawate) also illustrates the maintenance of the double consciousness that is always demanded from the oppressed (cf. Du Bois 1903). This is also what Fanon (1961) has called the old acquaintance of roles between the native and the settler. Whilst the native is seemingly resentful of the place of the settler in society, the colonial situation enforces the servant and master relationship. In fact, the native, as illustrated by July's (Mwawate's) continuing responsibilities, is forced to be the perpetual guardian of the settler's positions and privileges, even if it means this role is fulfilled at the expense of being dismembered for periods of time from his/her own family. In *July's People*, the case of the colonised protecting the colonisers' possessions instead of protecting their immediate and dismembered families is expressed by July's wife, Martha, who complains (Gordimer 1981, 20) that

> You used to write and say how you were looking after the house yourself—feeding their dog, their cat. That time when you were even sleeping inside the house, thieves came and broke the window where you were sleeping.

Historically, migrant labourers used to communicate with their families through letters that in some instances were read to the family by literate others within the village (Gevisser 2007). Therefore, as was a general practice among Africans trapped in the distant cities as a result of the migrant labour system, July (Mwawate) communicated with his family by letters because he was a migrant labourer in Johannesburg and was thus physically dismembered from his nuclear family. As we have come to know, dismemberment sometimes took the form of cutting people away from their memories (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2009), including the memory of family. Therefore, of additional interest in this article is how the question of dismemberment is continued even at a time when July (Mwawate) is expected to be re-membered with his family as a result of the liberation war that has forced the Smales to take refuge in his distant and unnamed village. The role that July (Mwawate) plays in relation to the Smales, in his village, in his house, in his community, seems to be a continuation of the very role he used to fulfil in the house of the Smales (running to the shops, bringing tea, worrying and taking care

of their children). It is this very role that has for many years separated him from his own village-based family. The lack of detail in the novel about July's emotional interaction with his own family indicates that dismemberment, as a result of colonised-coloniser relations, continues for July (Mwawate) even at the time when the liberation war reunites him with his village-based family. The novel also illustrates that, in some instances, his own family is also caught up in a situation where they need to partake in and contribute to his role as a servant of the Smales. However, the novel illustrates that such an additional role is performed reluctantly. His wife (Martha), for instance, observes (Gordimer 1981, 18) that she had

> given up the second bed, borrowed a primus stove for them; watched him [July], in the morning, take the beautiful cups he had once brought her from the place of his other life.

So, in this sense, July (Mwawate) remains a faithful servant to the settler colonisers' conveniences, especially in the maintenance of any semblance of urban life that they are mourning as a result of the volatile political situation that has gripped the country. Furthermore, throughout the unfolding of the storyline, the role of July (Mwawate), as this faithful servant who is duty-bound to love and take care of the colonisers' children, becomes hyper-visible. Thus, his continuing role as a worker for the Smales, his caring and nurturing attitude towards the Smales' offspring, and his overall concern for the wellbeing of that family, juxtaposed against his presence in his village, illustrate the idea of shattered black family relations under colonial conditions. Within the context of the novel, the seeming lack of care, concern and nurture towards his own family and children illustrate a narrative that registers continuities of dismemberment even when black fathers are temporarily reunited with their family members.

Erasure as Desertion: The Absence of July's Family Structure in the Novel

As indicated by Ramphele and Richter (2006), the impact of settler colonialism on the black family structure was not only felt at the level of physical abandonment by black fathers and their families. Rather, the emotional distance, which has become endemic as a result of the migrant labour system, also became a form of abandonment. In relation to *July's People*, whilst the omnipresence of the Smales is felt throughout the novel, one salient feature of this novel is how the "other" people, that is, July's (Mwawate's) family, is relegated to the background of the narrative. For instance, from the opening of the novel, the reader is acutely aware of the lives of the Smales: their choices in car colours, their family vacations, their pastimes, their children and even their career choices, which remain present throughout the narrative. Therefore, they are visible and there, just like how settler-colonial logic demands to be there in its naming and "discovery" of lands, natural resources and landmarks of interest in the colonised world. With regard to July's (Mwawate's) own family, the novel only suggests that he has been instrumental in the upkeep and maintenance of the family and "his" people. In contrast

to July's (Mwawate's) real family life, Gordimer (1981, 6) introduces the lives of the settler-colonial family thus:

> They stood around it [the car] indulgently, wife and family, the children excited, as it seemed nothing else could excite them, by a new possession.

Even though the discussion centres on the unsanctioned purchase of a vehicle by Bam Smales, the patriarch of the white family, the over-the-top appearance of the *colonial family structure* in the very first chapters of this novel further buttresses the erasure of July's "other" people. In this sense, the absence of July's "own" family structure in this early part of the novel implies that July (Mwawate) is a possession of the Smales, albeit in human form. By virtue of this absence, he becomes an extension of the Smales family's worldly possessions, such as their cars, house, money and other household goods.

Furthermore, when it comes to July's family, the names of and intimate details about the family are either delayed, suspended or missing entirely from the plot. For instance, Gordimer (1981, 15) writes of July's wife as being "a small, black-black, closed face, and huge hams" woman. Once the wife is introduced to the reader in this manner, the novel moves on to introduce July's mother and she is described as "an old lady" who is holding a nameless child. The child's only details are that he/she is "past the age of weaning [and is] turning up in sleep on her [July's mother] own lap." Later in this chapter, a few sketchy details of the mother are provided. These include the details of her dress code, for she "wore gilt drop ear-rings and a tin brooch" (Gordimer 1981, 15).

A significant point in the novel is that when the family is initially mentioned with reference to July, it is done with the purpose of exposing his escapades with the "town women."[3] Yet, the novel also indicates that "it was understood that July's responsibility was to his own family, far away." It was to a woman "never seen, [and] never imagined" (Gordimer 1981, 16). Therefore, in this sense, July's "other" people or his intimate family structure lacks visibility in the novel. In fact, the "distant" village family of July (Mwawate) remains an invisible and distant structure, even when they are physically available in the narrative. Often spoken for by their intermediary, July (Mwawate), the family members of July (Mwawate) seem emotionally absent from each other. They are not like the Smales, the people that the plot ensures we know so much about. In fact, the title, *July's People*, seems to suggest that July's real people are actually the Smales, the people whom he is a loyal servant to. It is only these people who seem to have a visible and emotional interest in each other. The following quotation (Gordimer 1981, 79) illustrates this point:

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3 The term "town woman" has often been used to illustrate the migrant labour system and its resultant aversion to the presence of women in urban areas. Thus, town women would be the absolute symbol of a lack of self-preservation, a lack of moral conduct and sexual promiscuity in the imaginaries of settler-colonial logic.

> Bam sang a comic song in Afrikaans for Royce.—Again! Again!—Gina wavered through a lullaby she had learnt from her companions, in their language. Victor became a raconteur, past, present and distance resolved in the tradition of anecdote.

This warmth and love that is shared between the Smales, even at their moment of frustration, dispossession and future uncertainty, is in direct contrast to the distance that is observed from July (Mwawate) in relation to his own family members. Among their interactions, the lack of detail or minimalist detail is an example of the impact of dismemberment of black family structures (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2009). As indicated earlier, when his family is introduced, in the third chapter of the novel, what we are faced with is a nameless and largely faceless family. This un-naming of July's family continues (Gordimer 1981, 16) in the following way:

> There were several others, young women and half-grown girls, in the hut. His sister, wife's sister-in-law, one of his daughters; he introduced them with a collective sweep in terms of kinship and not by name.

This statement comes immediately after July's (Mwawate) wife and mother are introduced to the reader. Almost throughout the entire novel, the intimate details of the now geographically re-membered family are lost. The novel portrays an existing family structure that renders the members unsure about how to speak to each other, often suspicious of each other, and that is defined by tension as a result of the 15-year absence that it felt when July (Mwawate) went to the city as a migrant labourer. Thus, in the entirety of the novel, the prevalent theme when July (Mwawate) returns to his village is the idea of absence, even when he is present, among his family members, including his children.

The Novel and July's (Mwawate's) Reasons for Absence

The themes of absence and dismemberment are central to *July's People*. More importantly, these themes reveal additional layers of anger and resentment on the part of those who had to abandon their families due to employment migration—a process that has been central to how settler capitalist South Africa operated and continues to operate (Gevisser 2007). The novel provides insight into this point, as the following (Gordimer 1981, 72) outburst by July (Mwawate) exemplifies:

> Fifteen years I'm work for your kitchen, your house, because my wife, my children, I must work for them.

Whilst these words are uttered in the process of arguing about the car keys, which July (Mwawate) has ostensibly "hogged," the most revealing idea about them is the anger that is kept by those who abandoned their families in service of the settler-colonial superstructure. It reveals a deep sense of resentment regarding how black men such as July (Mwawate) have been forced to abandon their families, including their children, in the process of eking out a living under settler-colonial conditions. Abandonment, in the

case of July, meant long periods of absence, forced separation from family members, intermittent visitations and, often, children growing up without the physical presence of both parents. Thus, for July (Mwawate), this absence means that he was only a producer of children but not a father, as the following quotation (Gordimer 1981, 134) suggests:

> He came home every two years and each time, after he had gone, she gave birth to another child. Next year would have been the time again, but now he had brought *his* white people, he had come to her after less than two years and already she had not bled this month.

These words are uttered by July's (Mwawate's) wife who clearly longs for her husband to be re-membered with his kith and kin. Overall, July (Mwawate) had been absent for about 15 years, and in this 15-year employment period to the Smales, he only visited for short periods of time every second year. Ultimately, his fictional character situates him among the many black fathers (and later mothers) who were dismembered from their families as a result of employment migration restrictions that were enforced by colonial-apartheid South Africa. These men (and later women), who travelled to the settler-colonial urban centres, such as the major cities of colonial South Africa, never really had the chance to look after their own families, except as financial providers. This is illustrated by how July (Mwawate) always had a child immediately after he migrates back to the city. Thus, the children of migrant workers, as exemplified in the case of July (Mwawate), did not grow up with both parents under a single homestead. Instead, they occasionally saw their parents on a seasonal basis, if at all. The non-presence of the migrant workers was also felt at the level of intimate partner relations. For instance, in *July's People* (Gordimer 1981, 132), it is noted that

> She [Martha, July's wife] was not used to having him present to communicate with directly; there was always the long wait for his answering letter, a time during which she said to herself in different ways what it was she had wanted and tried to tell him in her letters.

In essence, the traditional structure of the settler-colonial migration system meant that women were often required to be based in the homelands/Bantustans, whilst men were meant to be in the cities. This often complicated relations between intimate partners, as a result of the long absences from spouses. In this novel, this complication is underscored by how Martha finds it difficult to relate to July's (Mwawate's) presence. Furthermore, the extended absence of male spouses meant that they were accused of having grown distant to some of the protocols and ways of being in an African village. In one of their conversations (Gordimer 1981, 133; emphasis added), for instance, Martha responds to some of July's (Mwawate's) questions in the following way:

> She [July's mother] said it was time. The grass was right. She wanted to cut before the other women took the best. I can't tell your mother she mustn't do what she wants. I am her daughter, I must help her. *Perhaps you have also forgotten some things*.

She suggests this is because “you [July] have [had] to learn all their [the colonisers’] things, such a long time” (Gordimer 1981, 133).

Whilst the idea of dismemberment has largely defined black families since the inception of administrative and settler colonialism in Africa, the novel also illustrates that, in some instances, such families could not be entirely disfigured by settler colonialism. Seemingly among some of these families there was a fighting spirit that was ready to germinate and re-member the family structure. Or rather, there is a longing for being re-membered with one’s own blood relations. In the case of the novel (Gordimer 1981, 135), this is illustrated by the following statement:

> After the fighting is over, perhaps you can stay here. You said the job was finished. If we get more lands and we grow more mealies … a tractor to plough … Daniel says we’re going to get these things.

Overall, the idea of absence, as generally outlined in this novel, illustrates that dismemberment as a result of migrant labour was (is) felt most at the level of the family structure. From the difficulties of relating to one’s children and spouse to one’s duties as a husband, father or son, the overall impression, as illustrated by the novel, is that settler colonialism was instrumental in the disintegration of the black family structure. The failure to relate to one’s family, as experienced by migrant labour patriarchs, often meant that the cultures of black family dismemberment were planted and these germinated as a result of settler-colonial planning.

Conclusion

In this article, the overall objective was to investigate the role of the novel in registering the process of dismemberment as experienced by colonised black men, intimate partners, children and ultimately families. The article has discussed how this dismemberment manifests in the overall plot of the novel. Surprisingly, the theme of family dismemberment, as tackled by Gordimer’s *July’s People*, has been understudied by literary and cultural studies scholars. Thus, this article has tried to make sense of the recurring histories of black family dismemberment by analysing the novel in the context of colonial discourse. Whilst the issue of family dismemberment has been under-analysed in relation to *July’s People*, what this article illustrates is that settler colonialism has been central to the recurring histories of family dismemberment for the colonised blacks in South Africa.

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