

A Game of Snakes and Ladders: Sheila Gordon's *The Middle of Somewhere*

Donna R. White, Arkansas Tech University

Here in the States, Milton Bradley (now Hasbro) makes a simple children's board game called Chutes and Ladders. Players move their playing pieces back and forth across the board in an upward direction according to the number of spaces they roll on a die. If they land at the bottom of a ladder, they instantly advance upward to the top of the ladder. If they land at the top of a chute, they just as quickly slide down to the bottom of it. As simple as the game is, it can be frustrating to play if the designer makes the chutes longer or more numerous than the ladders or distributes them in such a way that the longest chutes are near the finish line. Play then epitomizes the old saying "one step forward, two steps back." Sheila Gordon's *The Middle of Somewhere* views the struggle against apartheid in South Africa in much the same way. For her black characters, the chutes are much longer and more numerous than the ladders.

Chutes and Ladders is a variation of the British game called Snakes and Ladders, which is played the same way. Many countries influenced by the British, including South Africa, adopted the game by its British name, thus retaining the rich connotations and allusions associated with snakes. The British did not invent the snakes or the game: they adapted this game from an Indian one called Moksha-Patamu, which provided religious instruction for the young, based on four Hindu virtues and twelve vices ("Snakes and Ladders"). The vices were snakes that led to reincarnation in a lower animal form. The moral aspect of the game must have appealed to the Victorians, for their early versions also featured virtues as ladders, helping players to reach heaven, and vices as snakes that forced the players downward toward hell. The original moral intent also adds to the symbolism inherent in the game. No doubt this is why some political commentators like to apply Snakes and Ladders as an analogy, as Avishai Margalit does in an article about the Middle East for *The New York Review of Books*:

As a boy I used to play the rather menacing game of Snakes and Ladders. The ladders, at least in the Israeli version, enabled you to skip rows on your way to heaven. Snakes brought you down to hell. At the top of the game board, just before you approached heaven, there were two successive snakes: a big snake that plunged you back to square one, and a small snake that tumbled you down a few rows but left open the possibility of going up a ladder to heaven. In the complicated game of the Middle East, the ladders lead to peace and the snakes to violence and war. And it is just not clear whether the current Intifada is a big snake that brings us all back to the square one of relations that existed between Jews and Arabs in 1948, or a small snake that is a temporary setback with an optional ladder to peace up the road. We lack the historical perspective to judge. Yet it looks like a pretty big snake to me (Margalit).

Sheila Gordon's *The Middle of Somewhere* invites a similar analogy. The novel is infested with snakes—not real, physical snakes but rather a place name that frightens the nine-year-old protagonist, Rebecca Gwala. Instead of viewing the relationship of Israel to Palestine as a game of Snakes and Ladders, Gordon is concerned with race relations in South Africa in the late 1980s. *The Middle of Somewhere* is about a village in South Africa that has been declared a "black spot" by the white government: an inappropriate black area in a white conclave that needs

to be cleared out to make place for a new white subdivision. The way to clear it out is to move all the residents to a distant new village that has been named *Pofadderkloof*, an Afrikaans name meaning “puff adder ravine.” In this novel, the game of Snakes and Ladders is a contest between the black inhabitants of an old, established village and the white officials who want to remove them.

The forced relocation of black inhabitants was a common tactic of apartheid:

In the name of apartheid, more than 3 million people were uprooted from their homes to satisfy government planners; millions more were imprisoned for infringing apartheid regulations. Black “homelands” set up ostensibly to allow blacks a measure of self-government remained dependent ultimately on white control (Meredith 16).

Declaring a village a “black spot” was only one of several ways to confiscate land. In this case, the white population of the nearby city was spreading out into suburbs and was hungry for more land on which to build. The white officials did not care that the land was already inhabited or that relocation would make commuting to the city for work (many villagers’ source of income) impossible. To convince the villagers to move voluntarily, government representatives visited individual families and spoke in glowing terms of the improved facilities and homes at Pofadderkloof.

The name *Pofadderkloof* is highly significant and suggests that Gordon may actually intend an analogy with the board game. The puff adder provides the snakes and *kloof* contributes a gorge or deep ravine, bringing to mind the concept of falling associated with the chutes of the American version of the game. As a South African who resettled in New York, Gordon would know both the British and American versions. To call even more attention to the name Pofadderkloof, Gordon has carefully omitted any other place names in the novel. We are never told exactly where the story takes place; all we know is that the nearby city, which is never named, is by the sea. The village that is declared a black spot is never named. The protest committee is referred to only as “The Committee to Save the Village.” Pofadderkloof is literally the only place name in the entire book.

I have not been able to confirm whether Pofadderkloof is a real place or not. There is a village called Pofadder in the Northern Cape of South Africa, but I cannot find the more specifically named Pofadderkloof. It is listed as a place name for a Winelands map of South Africa; however, none of the maps I consulted showed any such place. Gordon seems fond of similar names. In “The Greatest Show on Earth,” a short story for the *Atlantic Monthly*, she includes a town called Pofadderkranz. *Kranz* means a crown of rock on a mountaintop, but this place name does not have any particular significance in the story.

In *The Middle of Somewhere*, on the other hand, names (and the omission of names) are extremely important. Besides using only one place name—and using it often—Gordon gives personal names only to her black characters. Martha Gwala, Rebecca’s mother, works for a white family that is never named, even when Rebecca and her father visit the family’s house and speak with the white inhabitants. Gordon always refers to the woman of the house as Martha’s “madam.” The only white character with a personal name is the madam’s spoiled daughter, Mandy, whose broken toys are passed on to Rebecca. Even sympathetic white characters have no

name; the kind magician who conjures a frog out of Rebecca's pocket and the lawyer who fights to get Rebecca's father out of jail remain nameless. From Rebecca's perspective, the whites are the unknown, alien, and nameless Other. Such care for the inclusion and exclusion of proper nouns adds extra emphasis and significance to the names that do appear in the novel.

Pofadderkloof would be significant even if it were not the only place name. It is the source of Rebecca's fear for her family's future. When Rebecca's best friend tells her that everyone has to move to Pofadderkloof so the village can be bulldozed to make room for a new white subdivision, Rebecca asks her older brother Johnny about the name:

“What kind of snake is a *pofadder*?”

“*Pofadder*? A very bad kind. Their necks puff up, like balloons, before they bite.” He formed his thumb and forefinger into a snake head, snapping them at her. “Bite you—you die” (Gordon, *Somewhere* 24).

From that moment on, Rebecca has nightmares about snakes, and she believes that Pofadderkloof is overrun with them. “Did you see all the snakes there?” she asks a neighbor who returns from the new settlement (88). Rebecca instinctively associates fear with snakes. When her father is arrested for protesting the move, she thinks, “Fear was inside the house now, Rebecca knew; the black snakes had got in” (98).

Rebecca is right to fear puff adders: they are the most dangerous snakes in Africa because of their “wide distribution, common occurrence, and potent venom” (Mallow 65). Common and widespread throughout Africa, they are venomous vipers with the scientific name *Bitis arietans*. They are bad-tempered snakes that like to ambush their prey, and they strike with speed. Although active mostly at night, they are sometimes active by day during the rainy season (Spawls 478). Rebecca's brother, however, is incorrect about the certainty of death from a puff adder bite; even untreated bites do not necessarily end in death. Puff adder venom is extremely toxic, so these vipers are responsible for more fatalities than any other African snake; however, mortality rates from puff adder bites are actually low—less than ten percent of untreated cases (Spawls 478). The worst-case scenario is described in *True Vipers*: “If untreated, death may ensue within several days due to cerebral hemorrhage leading to convulsions, kidney failure, and complications caused by extensive swelling” (Mallow 67). Of course, death is not the only possible negative consequence of a puff adder bite; the victim is liable to experience severe pain, dizziness, shock, nausea, swelling, bleeding, and necrosis. Gangrene and secondary infections are common. Gordon has chosen her species of snake carefully so that she calls upon both the thousands of years of negative connotations associated with snakes in general and the very real and modern fear of a particular species in Africa.

In Gordon's version of Snakes and Ladders, Pofadderkloof and the snake after which it is named are the negative forces that send players backwards in the game. The ladders are the villagers' rare successful attempts to block the moves of the apartheid government. The first ladder in the game occurs when the villagers unite to force the white education department to provide another teacher for the under-funded village school, where students who are doing poorly have been expelled for lack of space and teachers. Since Johnny, Rebecca's brother, is one of the students who has been sent home, Martha and Amos Gwala, his parents, attend the protest meeting. As Amos reports to the children later, the meeting is powerful and effective:

Those men from the education department, they came there thinking they were just going to smooth things over—tell us about the wonderful new school there would be at Pofadderkloof, then send us all home. Well—they soon found out they were mistaken. . . . People were standing on the benches, shaking their fists! You should have seen those white officials—they were really scared (Gordon, *Somewhere* 13).

The success of this protest inspires the village council to take similar action regarding the move to Pofadderkloof. Big Albert Kosane, the head of the council, explains that if the entire village refuses to move, the white government will be unable to bulldoze their houses. The village council already has lawyers working on the case as well. Organizing the village to stand firm is the second ladder in the game, but it is followed immediately by a snake: during the middle of the night several families move out of their homes to Pofadderkloof, having been intimidated by the white officials from the planning department. They are moved stealthily, with protection from white policemen. Like the puff adders, the apartheid government strikes mostly at night. The disappearance of these families has a demoralizing effect on the remaining villagers, who worry that their firm stand against moving will fail if everyone does not stick together.

Big Albert's response is to build more support for the protest by forming the Committee to Save the Village, planning a march and demonstration, and arranging international news coverage. This marks another ladder in the game. Again, however, it is followed immediately by a snake. A second midnight disappearance includes the family of Rebecca's best friend and neighbor, Noni. For Rebecca, this is devastating—a particularly viral snake. Despite every attempt her family makes to cheer her up—small gifts, a special visit to her mother at work—she remains inconsolable.

The march and demonstration receive “worldwide attention,” a phrase Rebecca latches on to for encouragement and a feeling of being protected. Unfortunately, her father's speech at the demonstration results in his arrest and a seven-month detention. Everyone on the speakers' platform is arrested and jailed, although not until the media has departed. Martha Gwala relates events to her mother and daughter:

They [the police] waited until the meeting was over and the television people had packed up their cameras and the reporters were all leaving. Then they surrounded the platform where all the speakers were, still talking to one another. . . . Most people didn't even see what was happening. They arrested every one of them. All eight (99-100).

This is an even longer snake than Noni's midnight move to Pofadderkloof. The only consolation the family has is the immediate assurance from three lawyers that they are working on the men's release and that international attention will keep the men safe no matter how long it takes to free them.

Detention without trial was common during apartheid: “Between 1960 and 1990, some 80,000 people were detained without trial, among them 10,000 women and 15,000 children and youths under the age of eighteen” (Meredith 115). The General Law Amendment Act of 1963 allowed the government to keep detainees in solitary confinement indefinitely, with no access to

lawyers or visitors, and interrogators were allowed to use intimidation and torture on the prisoners. Authorities reported numerous questionable “suicides” among the detainees. Luckily, Rebecca is too young and innocent to realize the very real danger her father is in. Nevertheless, despite the sense of protection Rebecca feels when the lawyers are in the house, her father’s incarceration and her friend’s disappearance overwhelm her ability to cope. She becomes tired and listless, her grades at school dip alarmingly, and the nightmares about snakes return.

Fortunately for Rebecca’s health, her fate is really in the hands of Sheila Gordon, who concludes her game of Snakes of Ladders with two very long ladders and the promise of a third. First, Rebecca’s father is finally released from prison. From Rebecca’s perspective, this is the best ladder ever. But the fear of Pofadderklouf soon returns:

In the days that followed, Rebecca began to forget about the cold, hungry time of Papa’s imprisonment, the loneliness, the sadness. . . . But in the village, the buzz of talk about the removal was at the back of all the ordinary things that went on each day. Sometimes the snakes slid again into Rebecca’s dreams: Once she was showing Noni the dolls in the pram, but under the covers they found snakes instead, and she cried out in her sleep (145).

The greatest ladder of all means little to Rebecca, who knows nothing of politics, but everything to the adults of her village. A few months after her father’s release comes the announcement of the imminent release of Nelson Mandela. After twenty-seven years in prison, Mandela was finally released in 1990. The timing is significant for this novel: Rebecca’s father would have received much harsher treatment in the mid 1980s, but apartheid was nearing its end in 1990, making white officials more careful of their actions towards black prisoners. Even though Rebecca does not understand the significance of Mandela’s release, she is allowed to join the celebration:

Under the bright, joyful banners, among the dancing, the chanting, cheering, smiling villagers, Rebecca felt as if they were all being carried along by a great wave of good feeling. It was as if the happiness she had felt when Papa came home from jail, and when Auntie Miriam had brought her the black doll, and the wonder of the magician’s magic were spread out among all the people dancing under the hot, blue sky. If only Noni could be here too, she thought (148-49).

Rebecca’s desire reflects that of Noni’s Auntie Miriam, who ran away from Pofadderklouf once she realized its advertised wonders were all lies. Auntie Miriam returned to the village and took refuge with Rebecca’s family. Now, inspired by the events of the day, Auntie Miriam makes a momentous decision to bring Noni’s family back from Pofadderklouf:

“I’m taking the bus to Pofadderklouf. I’m telling my sister that now Mandela is free, things are going to change for us. And I’m bringing them back with me from that miserable place.”

They were all silent with amazement.

“Well—what do you think of that!” she said.

“You’ll bring Noni back!” Rebecca cried.

“Of course, child!” Auntie Miriam laughed. “Do you think I’ll leave her there—

in the middle of nowhere? I'm going to bring them all back to the middle of somewhere!"
(149-50)

With the promise of Noni's return, Rebecca's joy is complete. Even the fact that the fate of the village has yet to be decided no longer frightens her. She and Auntie Miriam believe Johnny's assurances that the white government can do nothing to them now. With Mandela's release, the game of Snakes and Ladders being played out in South Africa is coming to an end, and Rebecca at least has won. Winning means safety for everything that is important to her: her family, her friends, her village. Like St. Patrick, Nelson Mandela can chase away all the snakes.

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