

CRITIQUE OF POWER : REREADING NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE CONSERVATIONIST*

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Abstract:

*The Man Booker Prize winner novel *The Conservationist* (1974) of Nadine Gordimer is the sixth novel in her literary corpus of twenty one collections of stories, fifteen novels, a play and three collections of essays. The novel is a critique of white hegemony in South Africa during the height of the apartheid era. The Black population which is treated as nothing more than a black patch on the land, are shown in the novel in a selfless and natural relationship with their country. *The Conservationist* therefore is situated at the point where white history ends and black history resumes. Gordimer captures the climax of apartheid in her figurative depiction of the awful social and economic divisions in white and black life on a South African farm in the novel. The paper aims to point up how Gordimer in the novel shows apartheid as a part of colonialism, which dehumanizes the indigenous people. The study aspires to see the visionary and artistic aesthetics of Gordimer in *The Conservationist* and her prediction about the culmination of apartheid with blacks reacquiring their land. Besides this the paper also endeavours to study the Black Consciousness movement as a strong factor to diminish the white ego.*

Key words: *The man booker prize, nadine gordimer, hegemony, colonialism, indigenous, aesthetics, black consciousness movement.*

Introduction:

The novel is about the white industrialist and a wealthy capitalist, Mehring, who buys a farm and initially spends only the weekends on his farm and unexpectedly develops a strong attachment to the land as the story progresses. He is not in the strictest sense a farmer. He uses his farming activities as a sentimental site of connection to the African earth. This connection with the land is the chief focus of the novel. Gordimer shows the burden of colonial structures on the African land and landscape. *The Conservationist* represents two cultures one at the farm where Mehring uses to come on weekends only and the city where he works and lives during the week. The two places symbolically represent the wide cultural gap. City is a place where elite South Africans reside and on the farm there are poor blacks. The lifestyle between the two is completely contrary to each other. Mehring looks at blacks from the negative point of view. For example in “the figure of the black man” (Gordimer 3), Jacobus, who takes care of the farm when Mehring is away at the city, looks strange to him in his attire. “[a]lthough it is Sunday Jacobus is wearing the blue overalls supplied him and although there has been no rain and none can be expected for five months, he has on the rubber boots meant for wet weather” (Gordimer 4). Mehring is a rich business man. Through his character, Gordimer shows how the Whites are what can be called as 'negrophobic'. They look at blacks suspiciously.

Mehring is the one who is the dangerous perpetrator of apartheid. Apartheid is a kind of 'internal' colonization where blacks are subjugated by whites on all the fronts political, economical and social. Mehring, who is the representative of industrialized capitalized society, regards himself as an intelligent and a free will man and treats blacks as a black patch on 'his' land. He tries to dehumanize the natives through negative stereotypes like 'Other', 'loafer' etc. The 'Other' is a negative term set up by a colonizer's own dominant image against the colonized. Through these stereotypes they try to maintain their dominant

power over these countries as Mehring tries to maintain his might on the poor blacks in the farm. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* gives a detailed analysis of stereotypes which orientals deal with in their depiction of orientals. He says "the fable, the stereotype, the polemical confrontation. These are the lenses through which the Orient is experienced" (58). They are portrayed in terms of binaries. Some of the prominent binaries which *The Conservationist* represents are white/black, master/slave, powerful/powerless, ruler/ruled, poor/rich etc.

Mehring preserves power and lives himself a privileged life despite being surrounded by poverty. His treatment towards black workers in the farm is cruel and inhumane. This is clear when he provides them meat only when there is a death of any beast in his farm.

If a beast died of some illness that did not make it dangerous to eat, Jacobus was always given permission by the farmer to cut it up and distribute it to the farm workers. Sometimes it was possible to buy from some other farm meat from an ox that had died in this way. (Gordimer 201-202)

Mehring neglects the indigenous population from their ownership which results in his downfall. *The Conservationist* was written at that time, when there was an economic surge in South Africa rating it as one of the richest countries in the world. Mehring represents the white capitalistic world of that era. The economy of the country, rest on people like Mehring who exploit the land and the natives to become rich. His farm is close to the black location. Thousands of blacks are exploited in his farm. Mehring himself comes from one of the richest locations in Johannesburg. This highlights how blacks are pushed into locations which are meant for them only and the rich whites live a quite lavished and sumptuous life in cities. Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* differentiates the living standard of both whites and blacks living in colonies.

The town belonging to . . . the native town, the Negro village . . . is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other . . . The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light . . . a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers. (39)

While as the place where whites live is a, "well-fed town, an easygoing town; its belly is always full of good things" (Fanon 39).

Mehring represents the power which apartheid has given to him. The blacks who work in his farm are shown as traditional, who follow the customs of Zulu while as he regards himself as an intellectual, and his primary concern is to attend drunken parties and have sex. There is a line of demarcation between Mehring and Jacobus, a foreman working on his land. When Mehring comes, Jacobus stops, "as if there were a line drawn there, ten feet away from the farmer and goes through the formalities of greeting, which include a hand-movement as if he had a hat to remove" (Gordimer 4). Thus the blacks live in a world of barriers where they can't move at freewill. The labourers working on his farm are regarded by him as palm-greasers. This is what he calls the Indian shopkeepers also, "these Indians run rings round anybody when it comes to palm-greasing" (Gordimer 161). The farm acts as a sensual pleasures for him. He primarily minds to deal with his business and having sex is his only concern. This is clear when he molests a young Portuguese girl on his own tour to Japan and Mehring hardly feels guilt when the plane lands:

But at Lisbon a Portuguese family came abroad and after sulky looks between the two daughters who both wanted to sit with mama, one of them had to take the seat. So that was the end of his intention to lift the dividing arm and spread himself for sleep. It was midnight. She was a subdued girl, not pretty, nor perfumed beside him when the cabin lights were lowered and conversations gave way to hen-house shufflings. She had not said good evening, just looked at him with cow-eyes, someone who never got her own way, resigned to any objections that might be made as she approached the seat (Gordimer 146-47).

Mehring calls all the workers in the farm as his “boys” instead of their names. He hardly cares for their health and ignores their signs of malnutrition. Due to the lack of proteinaceous diet, “many of them had not had any since a calf had broken a leg and been slaughtered two months before” (Gordimer 202).

The dead body of the black man, which hold the most important symbolical significance in the novel is buried in the farm that is possessed by Mehring. Though they bury the dead man, it resurfaces again after the consistent rains. The resurfacing of the dead body haunts him psychologically, which shows there is no peace for even whites who try to flee the fact of apartheid and shows the illegal occupation of the land of the real owners. The unearthed black dead body of an African according to John Cooke, “is the image unifying the two threads of the novel; it serves as an omen of death for a white farmer and a prophecy to his African tenants that their land will someday be reclaimed” (534). The burial of the dead is the most ancient cultural practices of Zulu in South Africa. According to their belief the dead body needs to be properly buried and watched until he/she reaches his ancestors. Otherwise their body or soul will be overpowered by witches. The improper burial of the black dead body signifies the denial of his right to meet his ancestors. The improper burial, according to Zulu enrages gods which can be clearly seen when Solomon is attacked by the spirits:

[H]e was attacked in the night by a spirit: there was something down there at the third pasture . . . But the children did not go to the third pasture. They stopped one another, hung back: There is something there. No one had seen it; it had frightened one of the little ones . . . Something there. (Gordimer 102-3)

Even Mehring feels the spirit of the dead man, “he hears his own crashing footfalls as if he were being followed” (Gordimer 23). Thus, Gordimer uses Zulu myth to show Mehring's alienation from the South African tradition on one side while as on the other side it gives the vivid picture of the land dying under the weight of industrialization. It represents the guilt of the colonist and implies that the land originally belongs to the blacks. Like Mehring represents the world of whites, the body represents the black world that had been suppressed. Rising back of the buried body symbolises the repossession of South Africa by the blacks. Gordimer here prophesises the restoration of the land by blacks. In an interview with Stephen Gray, Gordimer says that the resurrection of the corpse symbolically reminds the slogan of African National Congress, According to her:

[A]t the end of *The Conservationist*, where the body that has been buried and “comes back” refers to Mayibuye, the black political slogan that means “come back Africa” back after the years of internal exile and white domination. It's is the only beautiful, poetically valid slogan I've ever heard. (268)

The very beginning of the novel makes it clear, that the land will be owned by blacks, so his assumption to conserve the farm is farcical because the farm will be inherited to blacks. As the opening paragraph suggests the “pale freckled eggs” are to be owned by the future generations of blacks, not whites. Mehring's son is a homosexual, therefore he can't reproduce, so can't inherit the ancestral belonging of the farm which suggest the sterile expectations of the white settler in Africa. Therefore the Whiteman Mehring can't keep the land under his command forever rather it will be automatically shifted to the rightful owners that is blacks who were there before the whites. Gordimer shows homosexuality as a symbol to highlight the unproductive and barren future waiting for the whites in South Africa. At the end of the novel, a powerful storm rises to drive Mehring from the land. Mehring does not literally die, but dies historically as he surrenders the farm which he has so desperately been trying to conserve. The dead body is given an appropriate ceremonial burial in the end by blacks maintaining their brotherhood and harmony which symbolically suggests the reclaiming of the land.

The main focus of *The Conservationist* is the land of South Africa. The black natives have been robbed of their land and Gordimer shows how they do not remain as mute spectators rather claim their land and their rights. Gordimer uses the land as a metaphor for history and national identity. She gives her

symbolic depiction of the awful social and economic divisions in whites and blacks on a South African farm in *The Conservationist*. She shows the nature of white historical destiny. Mehring tries to conserve the land by planting European Chestnut trees that he has imported from the West. This symbolically suggests the settler's attempt to plant his culture and ideology into the colonized land and people but fails in his attempt. This according to Eugene Good heart suggests the rejection from African soil to European will, "the African soil rejects the European will to dominate it" (114). Mehring's cynical and self-interested need to both exploit and conserve the land drives him to a state of turbulent collapse. Mehring thus represents the "shallowness of white colonial propagation in South Africa" (Macaskill 169). His colonial power ends. His family is disintegrated. His business and industrial enterprise ends in a failure. So Gordimer sees a kind of hope for the blacks and hints that future South African generation will see apartheid free South Africa. The writer uses the novel as a vehicle of prophecy to warn pro-apartheid capitalist government of South Africa for their finish from the majority indigenous black population. This is clear through the character of Terry (Mehring's son) who wants the workers to call him 'Terry' and not 'master.' Thus Gordimer as a visionary predicts about the culmination of apartheid almost half a decade ago before it officially ended.

The Conservationist was written in 1974, a period of intense repression. It was a period when there was rise in the Black Consciousness movement which laid much emphasis on re arrival of black tradition and culture. The philosophy of Black Consciousness Movement which started after 1960's by black students believed that blacks (by which they meant blacks along with Indians and coloureds) need to release themselves mentally from the slave frame of mind which they have been caught in because of racism and white liberalism. It was actually a realisation by the blacks to work as a whole and operate as a group in their struggle against apartheid. The rise in the black consciousness, succeeded in diminishing the white ego. With the rise in black consciousness movement, Gordimer through the character of Mehring shows the sense of alienation and dilemma of survival. Mehring is detached from any sort of company and any authentic relationship. That is why Gordimer makes use of lot of interior monologues. The technique of the interior monologue proves to be the only appropriate way to portray the self-absorption of the white world which has cut itself off from reality. Symbolically this shows his lack of contact with the people of his own country and the way Black Conscious movement managed to isolate the white man. In contrast to Mehring are the people who work in farm despite being financially in a detrimental condition, yet they are able to maintain relationship with one another and always possess the sense of belonging to the land. The presence of black dead body on his farm haunts Mehring throughout the novel. Blacks in the novel are in a selfless and natural relationship with their country. They have a close traditional affinity with their Zulu customs. Though there is no as such revolution in the novel which shows the rise of black consciousness but the rise of black dead body symbolically shows of the rise of the conscious of the souls of the blacks. Due to this consciousness, a conservationist of white racism and a white colonist farmer, Mehring is disillusioned by the threat of a reversal of the socio-political situation in the country. There was a sense of alienation in him. He psychologically and emotionally feels the influence of apartheid. Though outlawed politically and expelled geographically, the Black Consciousness movement works as a force to get equally treated on all the grounds. The novel therefore reflects the social and historical reality. Gordimer as a prophet or a seer had a great creativity and insight. Her farsightedness is clearly visible in *The Conservationist*. In the novel, Gordimer turns towards the future and thus foresees the future through the lens of the present. She prophesies that after the black uprising, the blacks will emerge as victorious and prophesies the expected collapse of white rule and believes that time will not be so far when victimizers will be at the mercy of the victims and South Africa will see itself Apartheid free.

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