

## Revitalising Black Culture: Exploring Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*

**M.Benila Vincy,**

Reg No: 18213014012007,

Ph.D, Research Scholar, Annai Velankanni College, Tholayavattam, Affiliated to MS University,  
Tirunelveli Rd, Abishekapatti, Tamil Nadu – 627012.

**Dr.J.Jesu Latha, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., Ph.D.**

Associate Professor & Research Supervisor, PG and Research Department of English, Annai  
Velankanni College, Tholayavattam, Affiliated to MS University, Tirunelveli Rd, Abishekapatti, Tamil  
Nadu - 627012.

### ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the transformative narrative of historical resurgence, portraying the revival of black culture in South Africa as it reconnects with its roots. Positioned at the juncture where white history concludes and black history reawakens, symbolizing the advent of black consciousness in 1970s South Africa, *The Conservationist* unravels the complexities of survival and alienation faced by progressive forces during this era. In alignment with the Black Consciousness Movement's call for a rediscovery of black cultural heritage, Nadine Gordimer skillfully incorporates Zulu myth to infuse a hidden logic into the fictional events on the farm. The burial of a deceased body becomes a poignant symbol, reaffirming the social and moral values of the submerged African proletariat. Through this, Gordimer envisions the reintegration of the dispossessed black communities into the land they once lost, prophesying a future where South Africa is reclaimed by its rightful inheritors.

**Key Words:** Resurgence, Dispossession, Revival, Survival, Land Repossession

Nadine Gordimer, a notable white South African writer, is acclaimed for her genuine depictions of black African culture. The term "black" holds political significance as a symbol of shared histories, highlighting the need for varied identifications based on ethnicity and race. In a fashion reminiscent of nineteenth-century African authors, Gordimer explores a wide spectrum with keen attention to the minutiae of everyday life. Through her novels, she endeavours to disrupt the marginalized status of Blacks, often relegated to the implicit and unseen "other" in prevailing aesthetic and cultural discourses. As someone deeply rooted in multiple cultural traditions, Gordimer embodies the multicultural reality of South Africa. Influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement, advocating a return to black cultural roots, she intricately weaves a buried logic into fictional events on the farm, addressing themes such as drought, death, debt-related attacks, fire, spirit possession, flood, and the subsequent reburial of the black body. These events are intricately connected to the cyclical patterns of the seasons within the novel.

In *The Conservationist*, the resurgence of political repression is symbolised by the gradual emergence of an inadequately buried black body, coinciding with the reclaiming of land by black individuals, serving as a symbolic and politically anticipatory manifestation. The assault on Solomon for debt is linked to the non-settlement of a cultural debt, manifested in the hasty burial of a black brother, accentuating cultural disparities. Indigenous practices like rain-making, medium ship, and spirit possession embody values distinct from those prevalent in white society, highlighting feminine empowerment in contrast to the masculine colonialism and latent sexual oppression in Mehring's world. The spiritual influence of Phineas's wife shapes her community, juxtaposed against the sexual exploitation and repression of white female characters. This contrast is exemplified in Mehring's inappropriate behavior towards a young girl during a flight, underscoring the connection between women and the land, using sexual guilt as a surrogate for colonial desires. *The Conservationist* prophesies an alternative South African future, aligning with visionary political novels. Gordimer challenges conventional realism by exposing the colonial imposition on Africa's land and landscape, presenting Mehring's internal reality in stark contrast to the external reality, ultimately replaced by an alternative social text. The displacement of the modernist Mehring signifies a shift towards a socially-driven aesthetic where conservation aligns with community and possession equates to prophecy.

Similar to myths, rituals hold a distinct position in South African culture, glorifying the nation's cultural identity. Defined by Bruce Lincoln as "...a coherent set of symbolic actions that has a real, transformative effect on individuals and social groups" (55), rituals, particularly those associated with birth, marriage, and death, play a crucial role. Funerary rituals, integral to Zulu culture, guide individuals through the transition between states, emphasizing the importance of proper burial to ensure the safe journey of the deceased to the world of ancestors. In *The Conservationist*, the improper burial of the black man denies him the opportunity to merge with his ancestors, considered sacrilegious in Zulu belief, provoking the wrath of the Gods. The account of Solomon's attack by unseen spirits further reinforces this belief, as Mehring senses the haunting presence of the dead man on the farm. This spectral influence extends to Phineas's wife, who exhibits peculiar behaviour, indicating sensitivity to the dead man's presence. In Mehring's world, his true adversaries are two nameless entities—a woman and the lingering spirit of the deceased.

The novel envisions a historical shift, positioning itself at the juncture where white history concludes, and black history emerges during the Black consciousness era in 1970s South Africa. *The Conservationist* delves into the challenges of survival and alienation faced by progressive individuals in this tumultuous period. Mehring, the protagonist representing the progressive Afrikaner elite, epitomises this estrangement, evident in his lack of authentic connections and the prevalence of interior monologues. Apartheid's impact is palpable, isolating the white population and emphasising Mehring's disconnection from the South African people and the land. In contrast, the small black community working on Mehring's farm emerges as genuine caretakers of the land, embodying fidelity in relationships with the living and the dead. The novel's concluding paragraph, describing the burial of an unknown black man, underscores this stark contrast. It reveals through the following lines: "The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They have put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possessions of this earth, theirs; one of them" (323).

The novel's depiction of the burial of the black man underscores the revival of social and moral values within the marginalized African proletariat. Gordimer's prophetic narrative envisions the dispossessed black communities of Highveld Transvaal ultimately reclaiming the world they lost. In *The Conservationist*, this act of burial serves as a symbolic expression of the eventual reclamation of South Africa by the black population. While the narrative laments the decline of white South Africa, particularly portrayed through the protagonist Mehring's affluence and the societal decay, it also hints at a future where the dispossessed communities regain their rightful place. This duality, emphasising both the strength of the protagonist and the underlying turmoil in South Africa, forms a compelling core of the novel.

*The Conservationist* explores the profound impact of societal barriers that constrain its characters within a state of immobility. The novel vividly portrays the psychological toll inflicted by these barriers, exemplified when Jacobus halts at a symbolic line, unable to approach Mehring closely. This imagery reflects the pervasive psychological damage caused by societal divisions. Mehring, the protagonist, perceives distinctions between himself, the De Beers, and the black community, emphasising observable similarities between the latter two groups. His observations, however, are tainted by prejudiced perspectives, overlooking the rich tapestry of black existence integral to the South African landscape. The novel underscores Mehring's blindness to the extinction of African culture, focusing solely on the depletion of natural resources. Gordimer employs this narrative to voice opposition against white occupation of land in South Africa, providing an inside view of history while illuminating settlers' consciousness in the region.

In *The Conservationist*, the language barrier emerges as a powerful force, contributing to the division of people in South Africa alongside territorial segregation and racial prejudices. Antonia's husband, engaged in linguistic research on Bushmen in South Africa and Australian aborigines, underscores the intricate richness and complexity of languages. The use of specific terms such as "Bantu" and "Kaffir" for black people at the location, along with designations like "farmer" and "Kraal" for the white man and compounds, accentuates societal divisions. Afrikaans is labeled as "the white man's other language" and becomes a symbol of identification with the police authorities. Mehring's preference for Afrikaans in dealings with them signifies his alignment with that group. The

linguistic choices of characters, such as the De Beers speaking English with a strong Afrikaans accent, exemplify the nuanced ways language defines social boundaries. The novel portrays instances where individuals find pleasure in crossing over into another language, reflecting both the complexities of linguistic identities and the confined nature of South African society. The use of diverse languages serves as a tool for identification and reinforces societal barriers, as seen in the perceptions of an Indian proprietor's speech by farm people.

In *The Conservationist*, Mehring navigates a dual existence, physically shuttling between two distinct cultures represented by his weekend retreat on the farm and his weekday life in the city. Unaware of the profound implications, Mehring's alternating residences unwittingly mirror the impending demise of his accustomed way of life. The spatial proximity between the city and Mehring's farm belies the significant cultural gap each location embodies. The city houses affluent white South African businessmen, while the farm is home to impoverished black individuals. Mehring's associates in the city engage in structured routines tied to clocks and machinery, attending board meetings and dinner parties with precision. In contrast, life on the farm aligns with natural rhythms, responding to the weather, the land, and bodily needs. The activities of the black residents unfold in sync with the environment, dictated by tasks like gathering mealies, contingent on weather conditions. This stark contrast underscores the disparity between the two cultures and emphasizes the cultural and societal divisions present in South Africa.

When introduced to Mehring, a prosperous middle-aged pig-iron dealer, he grapples with a vague yet disquieting sense that neither the city nor his rural retreat feels like a true home. Deep within Mehring's subconscious, perhaps unbeknownst to him, resides the desire to simplify his life as he nears the end of his most productive years. Despite this yearning, he faces the harsh reality that simplifying life in South Africa is no easy feat. Disillusioned with his urban industrialist existence, Mehring yearns for escape to his farm, where he can connect with the instinctive and sometimes irrational impulses elicited by the land. His attempts to avoid city life and social interactions lead to elaborate excuses at the office and among friends. Ironically, the farm, the sanctuary he seeks, fails to bring the peace he desires, but instead introduces new anxieties. As the conservationist of the land, Mehring vehemently opposes what he perceives as the carelessness of the black residents. Despite his desire to belong to the country, Mehring never confuses himself with the locals. Proud of his conservationist habits, he remains largely oblivious to the fact that, in the African grasslands where his story unfolds, he is an intruder. This narrative, spanning from early summer to spring, begins with Mehring's Sunday morning excursions to his farm outside the city and culminates with his departure from the country (43).

The morning appears ordinary as Mehring drives out in his silver Mercedes, encountering a group of black children collecting guinea fowl eggs along the way. The children, their palms cupping the eggs, smile proudly in the grass, seemingly undisturbed by Mehring's presence. Unaware of the intrusiveness of his car into the rural setting, Mehring is preoccupied with the routine reprimand. However, this seemingly ordinary day takes an unexpected turn when Mehring's black foreman informs him of a dead stranger found in the third pasture. This event becomes the focal point of the story, serving as an image and symbol around which Mehring's, the blacks', the land's, the author's, and possibly our own narratives converge. The discovery consumes Mehring's waking moments, imagination, and rational thoughts as the seasons pass. Despite the police burying the body on the spot without removing it, Mehring redirects his annoyance toward the demands of the blacks in South Africa. During his drives and walks, he engages in a mental dialogue about civil rights with a woman he knows, pondering what the blacks seek and expressing skepticism about achieving peace, happiness, and justice through conventional means. It reveals through the following words: "What is it they think they can have? What do they think's available? Peace, Happiness and Justice? To be achieved by pretty women and schoolboys? The millenium? By people who want good respectable company lawyers?" (85).

Mehring's internal debates repeatedly involve a woman who, due to her work with blacks, leaves the country, but remains a lingering presence in the third pasture. Mehring accuses her of wanting global change while preserving what she likes for herself. This critique extends to the burial analogy: conditions in South Africa mirror the untouched body in the third pasture. While Mehring ostensibly addresses social and political issues, the buried body represents a deeper connection. The

narrative's ambiguity constructs an angry thesis: South Africa is a shallow grave concealing a decaying corpse. The surface may not reveal corruption, but occasional encounters expose festering realities. Following the discovery of the dead stranger on the farm, Mehring's ties to the land deepen as urban discontent grows. Metallic city images contrast with rural scenes, highlighting a symbiotic bond and the macabre reminder of the buried stranger.

Mehring's connection to the land and the deceased intruder is evident in passages where he enters the third pasture, reclines beneath the willows, and drifts into sleep. His awakening is abrupt and tumultuous:

Perhaps he has dozed; he suddenly -- out of blackness, blankness --- is aware of breathing intimately into the earth . . . There is sand on his lip. For a moment he does not know where he is or rather who he is; but this situation in which he finds himself, staring into the eye of the earth with earth at his mouth is strongly familiar to him. It seems to be something already inhabited in imagination . . . He rolls onto his side, where he has the impression the reeds facing him hide him as drawn curtains keep out day. The sense of familiarity, of some kind of unwelcome knowledge or knowing, is slow to ebb. (39-40)

This passage, along with similar ones, highlights the contradictions in Mehring's situation. As a white landowner in South Africa with considerable wealth, Mehring intends to pass on the vast property to his son. However, the revelation of his son's homosexuality raises doubts about the continuity of the family line and inheritance. The novel suggests that the answer to the question of who will inherit this part of Africa is not straightforward, and the intruding colonists will face challenges. The narrative prophesies that those who have been intruded upon—the indigenous people—will eventually prevail. The cluttered lives of the settlers, filled with modern conveniences, are portrayed as hindrances that distance them from human warmth and closeness, leading to nonproductively. The ironies underscore a harsh reality: the white South African is portrayed as an intruder in their own homeland, unable to secure the land due to historical circumstances and resistance. The novel implies that, despite conservation efforts, the land will rightfully return to its original owners, the black population.

The novel ominously suggests that those intruded upon in Africa will ultimately triumph over settlers encumbered by the trappings of modernity. The settlers' lives, cluttered with technology and conveniences, lead to their unproductive demise. Revelations of Mehring's son's homosexuality and Mehring's own troubled sexuality underscore the sterile expectations imposed by white settlers. The narrative vividly portrays the settlers' futile attempts to establish meaningful connections in a resistant land. Ironies echo in **The Conservationist**, highlighting a harsh reality: the white South African is an intruder in their own homeland, thwarted from claiming the land by historical circumstances and resistance from the land and its rightful owners, the blacks. Despite conservative efforts, the white man is powerless against the ancient claims of the original inhabitants. Nature, akin to works like **Heart of Darkness** and **A Bend in the River**, hinders the intruder; spring rains impede Mehring's farm access, forewarning through a decaying corpse. As Mehring plans a trip abroad, black farm residents arrange a proper burial, concluding the novel with a prophetic note on the intruder's retreat and the land's reclamation by its rightful heirs.

The burial of a black farm resident signifies restoring balance, concluding the novel. Preceding this, Mehring, an interloper, must secure the trespasser's burial rights. The intense passage reflects Mehring's distress, merging past concerns and nightmarish visions. Post-burial, the narrative unfolds: rains cease, Mehring encounters a hitchhiking girl after a farm visit, diverting uncomfortably to an industrial site. This underscores clashes between black neglect and Mehring's disdain, highlighting white industrialists' intrusion. The burial symbolises equilibrium, echoing Mehring's struggles and broader societal tensions. The narrative explores identity, power, and societal dynamics in a condensed form.

Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* serves as a compelling exploration and critique of the complex dynamics within South Africa's societal landscape. Through Mehring's experiences, the novel delves into the intricate interplay of race, power, and identity. The burial of the stranger becomes a poignant symbol, signifying a potential restoration of balance amidst disrupted lives. Gordimer adeptly weaves together themes of intruder and intruded, unveiling the tensions between white settlers and the rightful owners of the land. This literary work stands as a thought-provoking

reflection on the multifaceted challenges and historical injustices faced by black communities. Overall, *The Conservationist* contributes significantly to the discourse on cultural revitalization and societal introspection.

**Works Cited**

Coetzee, J.M. Review of Nadine Gordimer by Michael Wade. *Research In African Literatures* **11.2(1980): 253-256.**

Clingman, Stephen. *History From the Inside: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*. Massachusetts. U M P, 1992.

Cooke, John. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: private Lives/Public Landscapes*. Baton Rouge. Louisiana: S U P, 1985.

Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge. Cambridge U P.

Gordimer, Nadine. *The Conservationist*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005.

Macmillan, Palgrave. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*. Ed. King, Bruce. New York: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1993.